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HER HUSBAND'S

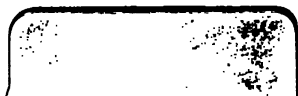


KEEPER.





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HER HUSBAND'S KEEPER.

A Novel.

BY

MRS. MACKENZIE-DANIEL,

AUTHOR OF "ESTHER DUDLEY'S WOOERS," "THE OLD MAID
OF THE FAMILY," ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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HER HUSBAND'S KEEPER.

CHAPTER I.

MARGARET'S NIGHT-WATCH.

Mrs. DAVID FLETCHER had yet another warm greeting to receive, another brief interview to go through, before arriving at home that day. Passing along the High-street of Ditchley, entirely absorbed in her own very anxious thoughts, not even aware that her carriage had entered the town, she was roused from her perplexed meditations by the abrupt stopping of the horses, and the almost simultaneous apparition of a smiling, familiar face at one of the windows. Letting this down immediately, she shook hands with Mr. Spenser, observed that it

was a miserable evening for him to be out walking, and asked if she might not have the pleasure of giving him a seat in the carriage to the Hall.

A sudden idea had, in truth, come into this poor little woman's head, in reference to the possibility of consulting the Rector on the subject of Elizabeth's equivocal proceedings, and entreating him to advise her as to what course she ought to pursue. It was only a momentary suggestion, inspired by her really distracted frame of mind ; but she might have carried it out, and possibly have altered, by so doing, the whole sequence of future events, had the gentleman been able to accept her friendly invitation.

But he was not able. Thanking Mrs. Fletcher cordially, and looking as if the temptation offered was a very strong one, he explained that he had two or three visits to pay in the town. There was some sickness about, and his parishioners, having

heard of the outbreak of a serious epidemic in a neighbouring village, had taken fright, and were doing their utmost—a few coward spirits amongst them, at least—to spread a regular panic. If this were not stopped, Mr. Spenser said, their fears might hasten on the calamity they were dreading, and all who had lived long in Ditchley knew that it was far easier to get an epidemic into the place than to get it out again. The town was not a healthy one, by any means, lying nearly in a valley, and being indifferently drained. He did not, however, believe that there was ground for apprehension as yet. People naturally had bad colds at this season of the year, and in some cases there might be a little sore throat or even feverishness; but nothing would have been thought of it, but for what had been heard concerning the infected village. He, Mr. Spenser, and the doctors had agreed to go round and try if they could not talk some grains of common

sense into the panic-stricken people, before worse came of it.

"So you see, dear Mrs. Fletcher," concluded this affectionate and excellent pastor, "that I have no choice but to sacrifice inclination to duty to-night. I will come up, if possible, to-morrow, just to let you know how things are going on. You must keep Amy frôm the town for a day or two, and there can be no need for you to drive this way yourself. Good-evening. Don't be the least uneasy. I am thoroughly persuaded the whole thing is simply a weak cry of 'Wolf,' when there is no wolf within a hundred miles. My kind regards to Mr. Fletcher and the young ladies. You look so cosy and warm in there, that if I stay contemplating you any longer, the temptation to fill the opposite corner may be too seductive ; so once more, dear Mrs. Fletcher, good-bye."

Margaret was not in the very slightest

degree uneasy about this rumour of sickness in Ditchley, but she was sorry the Rector had not been free to return home with her. The more she thought of Mr. Perkins's news, the more utterly bewildered she became, as to what immediate use she could make of it. If she told her husband without very careful preparation, there was no saying to what lengths his anger and excitement might carry him, and Margaret was firmly convinced that harshness or violent reproaches would drive Elizabeth to extremities. On the other hand, if she could summon up courage to speak to the girl herself, what end would it answer, beyond intensifying her step-daughter's aversion, and prompting her to more open defiance! And yet, to remain absolutely silent, with the knowledge of those clandestine meetings in her possession, Margaret felt would be criminal, and a sure way of dooming the infatuated Elizabeth to the destruction she

was evidently courting, in her blindness and ignorance, for herself. That the stranger was her cousin, Herbert Meredith, there could not be the shadow of a doubt, and that he was here for the purpose of urging her to marry him secretly, Margaret entirely believed.

But she believed also, judging from her own observations of Elizabeth Fletcher's character, that it would not be a very short or a very easy task to persuade her into a step which the whole world would condemn, and designate as one of glaring impropriety. The lady not being of age they would probably have to go to Scotland for the performance of the marriage ceremony, and Margaret could not help thinking that her step-daughter, however self-willed, passionate, and unamiable in her general relations to those around her, had too exalted an estimate of her own dignity, and indeed too pure a mind to be readily induced to descend to a

vulgar and questionable expedient of this nature.

Anyhow, Mr. Herbert Meredith must, she thought, prepare himself for a lengthened siege, and she should have time for careful personal vigilance as regarded Elizabeth, and for equally careful feeling of her ground as regarded enlightening her husband. Still, though this was the prevailing colour her reflections took at last, it cannot be said that Mrs. David Fletcher had quite made up her mind, when she entered her own doors that evening, as to how much, or how little, secrecy, she should maintain for the present, on the subject that had been so miserably harassing her.

David met his wife in the hall, anxious at her being so late ; and having ascertained the cause of her detention (she only, however, told him of her second interview), he hastened to give her the information that Amy was with her sister in the boudoir, whence he had,

himself, just come. Elizabeth had most rashly, he added, gone for a drive in the afternoon, but had returned early, and had since been seized with shivering fits, and sensations of nausea. She looked so ill, too, that he had not hesitated to send for Dr. Emerson, whose arrival they were now every minute expecting. Margaret's news about the panic in Ditchley, though she made very light of it herself, not unnaturally increased the father's anxiety. Neither of his girls had ever had scarlet fever, he said, with a white terrified face, and of course these were exactly the premonitory symptoms of that dire malady. In vain his wife assured him that head-ache and sore throat would have been much more significant—that there really was no fever of any kind, as yet, within ten miles of the Hall, or of Ditchley even—poor David had got the notion firmly rooted in his head now, and all the arguing in the world, if his wife had not been too tired

herself to persevere in her arguments, would not have driven it out.

At his request, she went at once to the boudoir to look at the patient, but Elizabeth, possibly anticipating such a visit, was lying on a sofa by the fire, with her eyes closed, and Amy said she thought her sister was just dozing a little.

"Anyhow, I will not disturb her," Margaret whispered, after stooping to look as narrowly as she could into the certainly flushed face of the supposed sleeper. "Her maid had better come and sit in the room with her while we are at dinner, which must be waiting now; and no doubt Dr. Emerson will be here by the time we have finished."

David, wholly absorbed in his own restless anxiety, seemed a little surprised that his wife could suggest their going down to their dinner as usual. He forgot that she had been out in the cold frosty air all the afternoon, and that the facts of Elizabeth having

shivered after a drive in an open carriage, and even being threatened with a bilious attack, were scarcely sufficient reasons for her step-mother to abstain from eating.

"You and Amy can go and dine together," he said, as they all three stood for a moment outside the boudoir; "but for my part, I could not touch a mouthful till I have seen Emerson. I shall hover about till he comes, and bring him up here at once. But, first, I will go down and ring for Benson to attend upon her mistress."

Margaret thought, in her secret heart, that he was very foolish not to take his dinner, but as there was no manner of doubt that his fidgety and restless state of mind would have prevented his enjoying it, she offered no remonstrance, sending Amy to the dining-room, and promising to be with her there in ten minutes.

These two got over their meal quickly, and were in the drawing-room with Mr.

Fletcher by the time the doctor arrived. Amy had told Margaret, in answer to the latter's inquiries, that Elizabeth had only complained of feeling ill about half-an-hour after her return, that she had begun shivering at first, and had presently mentioned that she was sick. Amy believed she had only caught a bad cold, but as Elizabeth was never ill her sister was easily alarmed, and had run at once to tell their father. As soon as he saw his daughter and heard her symptoms from herself, he had become nervous, Amy said, and though Elizabeth had scoffed at the idea, had insisted on dispatching one of the men servants immediately for Dr. Emerson.

He was nervous still when that gentleman, at length, made his appearance, and spoke vaguely and mysteriously, as doctors love to speak, concerning the rumour of serious illness in Ditchley. He was not prepared to say that there was absolutely no founda-

tion for the alarm which undoubtedly existed in the town, and which he and others had been endeavouring to calm that afternoon; neither, on the other hand, could he assert that there was any real ground for it. All he knew, for certain, was that the epidemic raging in the neighbouring village—a singularly damp, marshy locality—though called scarlet fever, was in truth a fever of an even more malignant and serious kind, and it was because the Ditchley people had heard this, that the panic had spread so rapidly. He did not, however, believe that there was a single case of even ordinary scarletina in the town, and he hoped that in a few days the present uneasiness would have entirely subsided. Of course, it might turn out otherwise, and if so, they must meet the calamity as best they might.

Upstairs this provoking doctor was equally vague and unsatisfactory. Miss Elizabeth was unquestionably very unwell. She had


many feverish and bilious symptoms, and her pulse and tongue both denoted an extremely excited state of the nervous system. It might be only a severe cold accompanied by derangement of the liver, in which case the medicine he would send on reaching home would set her up in a day or two; but the symptoms exhibited might possibly indicate more serious mischief, and be the forerunners of almost any description of fever. He did not think it was so; he earnestly trusted it was not, but in all these doubtful cases the utmost precaution was necessary, and he should order Miss Elizabeth to bed immediately, with a good fire in her room, which must be kept up all night. The medicine he was going to prescribe would have to be taken at regular intervals, in the event of the patient being awake; otherwise sleep and warmth were as likely to do her good, and to calm that excitement of the nerves from which she was suffering at present.

All this, and a great deal more (for Dr. Emerson had got a bottle of fine old Madeira beside him, and seemed in no particular hurry to depart) was said in the drawing-room, David, with his wife and Amy, being the anxious and greatly interested listeners. The father was not at all reassured by the doctor's opinion, which, considering its general haziness, was perhaps not to be wondered at. He asked a thousand questions while Dr. Emerson was sipping his wine, and gained in return (as he remembered later) curiously little information.

Margaret told him, when at last they were alone, and she had with difficulty persuaded him to take some refreshment, that she was certain Dr. Emerson knew no more what was the matter with Elizabeth than they did themselves. It was quite right, no doubt, to order her to bed, and to insist on her and her fire being attended to during

the night; but for the rest, the good man had evidently been groping in thick darkness, and talking big that they might not find it out.

Elizabeth herself, in the midst of all this excitement was very quiet and subdued. She did not even ask what Dr. Emerson had said downstairs, but appeared content to go to bed as she was desired, and to acquiesce in whatever arrangements those around her were making for her comfort. David would linger and fuss about the sick room till the last, giving a hundred directions to Benson, who was to sit up with her mistress, seeing that the medicine and a jug of barley-water, with glasses and spoons were all ranged on a table by the bedside; feeling Elizabeth's pulse so often that the weary object of his solicitude was obliged to assure him that he was only irritating her nerves, and destroying her chance of sleeping; and finally, charging Benson in the most solemn manner



to fetch him should his daughter seem in any way worse during the night, and on no account to go to sleep, even for a minute, herself.

He was quite worn out in the end by his bodily exertions and mental restlessness, and to Margaret's thankfulness did not stay awake half an hour after his head was on his pillow. But it was otherwise with her. She had a legion of unquiet thoughts to drive "tired nature's sweet restorer" from her own eyes, and having no faith in the wakeful powers, during a whole night in a warm room, of a girl of Benson's age, it occurred to her that she would go softly and ascertain how things were progressing in the invalid's apartment, herself.

Her first idea was, if she found Benson very sleepy, or asleep, to replace her by her own maid, who was older and a very sensible woman into the bargain; but as Margaret stepped noiselessly along the passages lead-

ing to her step-daughter's quarters, she came to the resolution of dismissing Benson to bed in any case, and remaining as her substitute till the morning. Her husband was a very heavy sleeper, and would not be likely to miss her. Even if he came to look for her he would approve of what she proposed doing; and, who could tell? it might do good in more ways than one.

As was to have been expected, poor Benson, having struggled with nature and youth as long as she possibly could, was now nodding contentedly in her easy chair, the fire nearly out, and the temperature of the large, lofty room becoming colder and colder every minute. Fortunately Elizabeth was also sound asleep, and, going on tiptoe to look at her Margaret, discovered that she was breathing softly and regularly, though her face was still flushed, and there was some moisture that had the appearance of tears beneath the shut eyelids.

Returning after this survey to Benson, Mrs. Fletcher very gently roused the girl from her slumbers, and explaining wherefore she had come, desired her to get at once to bed, so that she might be fresh and well to wait on her mistress again in the morning.

Full of penitence and apologies, which Margaret listened to with an indulgent smile, Benson just stayed to make up the dilapidated fire, to show Mrs. Fletcher the medicine, to assure her that Miss Elizabeth had rested as quietly as a new-born babe, and then crept away, nothing loth, to finish her own broken and stolen sleep.

Margaret had been sitting for more than half an hour by the restored fire, thinking fast and busily, as she warmed her feet, and watched the leaping flames, when a voice from the bed called, in a languid undertone—

“Benson, are you awake? What o'clock is it?”

In a moment the new nurse had risen, and was standing where the light from the night lamp fell full upon her, close beside the patient.

"Don't be startled," she said, with extreme gentleness (for Elizabeth had sprung up in bed, as though she had been suddenly shot). "I could not sleep myself, and doubting the capacity of Benson for keeping awake, I came to see after you. I have sent her to bed now, and mean to stay with you till morning. It is nearly three at present, and you must take your medicine,"

Her studied quietness, and the very matter of fact way in which she explained the situation, had probably the happy effect of saving them both from a highly dramatic scene, towards which Elizabeth had shown symptoms of inclining. As it was, she replaced her head upon the pillows, when Margaret had done speaking, and only answered, wearily—

"You are very good to give yourself so much trouble, and I am distressed that you should have done it for me. Benson surely might have kept awake for one night. She shall hear of this in the morning."


"Never mind Benson just now," said Margaret, soothingly (children and invalids have an equal right to soothing treatment, even if they are not quite so good as they ought to be). "I don't really think she could help being sleepy. But, tell me how you have rested, yourself, Elizabeth, and how you feel, and then we must see about Dr. Emerson's delicately tinted medicine. Look, what a beautiful rose colour he has given to it."

"I don't want medicine," Elizabeth asserted, with some petulance but more dejection in her voice. "I am not ill in the way they think. I wish everybody would leave me alone. Do go back to bed, Mrs. Fletcher. It irritates me beyond measure to see you here."

Margaret smiled, as she patiently worked the cork out of the bottle, poured out the given quantity, and handed the glass to the invalid.

Elizabeth looked at her steadfastly for a moment, then once more sat up, with an angry jerk, in bed, and, almost snatching at the pretty, rose-coloured mixture, swallowed it without another word, but with a face of cold derision—probably at her own weakness.

“Not so nasty, is it?” inquired Margaret, taking back the glass, and determined not to see that her step-daughter was chafing and writhing under the infliction of her ministrings. “Even physic in our luxurious age is made agreeable to the taste. And I am sure, if we could, we should change the rod with which our best Friend chastises us for our sins and mistakes into a bunch of harmless feathers. Luckily, we cannot do this, and so our poor backs sometimes get very sorely wounded.”



"I am very sleepy," said Elizabeth, drily, "and if you persist in remaining here, you had better go to the fire, and leave me to rest if I can. I shall be able, I hope, to thank you better in the morning for making a victim of yourself on my behalf. It is all through papa's fidgetty and weak-minded fancies."

Margaret shook up the pillows, smoothed the bed-clothes, diminished the light on the small table, and then went quietly back to her own chair by the fire.

She was not deceived by Elizabeth's brusquerie and ungraciousness. She saw that the girl's mind was in a wild turmoil, and that her rude, abrupt manner, and apparent ingratitude, were, in fact, only the bubbles that rose to the surface of the troubled waters. She had, in truth—this gentle, tender-hearted Margaret—too much faith in human nature to believe that even Elizabeth Fletcher could remain

cold, and hard, and unloving, if she once took in that those whom she had done her best to repel were patiently seeking to win her affection and confidence.

CHAPTER II.

MISS ELIZABETH'S INDISPOSITION.

WHETHER Elizabeth really slept any more that night, Margaret could not quite determine. At the hour when the medicine was due, the latter went softly to the bedside, and found the invalid's eyes fast closed, and her attitude sufficiently suggestive of restfulness to justify her not being disturbed, though the watcher had her suspicions, from certain tremulous movements of the full white eyelids, as she stooped over the bed, that the slumbers of its occupant might be less profound than they appeared. Anyhow, the patient made no sign, and the self-ap-

pointed nurse, but for missing her own sleep, had a tolerably easy time of it.

With the very first dawn of morning, Benson came noiselessly into the room, bringing some warm delicious tea, both for Mrs. Fletcher and the invalid, and hoping, probably, by this zeal and thoughtfulness, to escape the reproof which she feared she had earned from Miss Elizabeth, by her drowsiness of the previous night.

Margaret was very thankful for her share of the tea, and having drunk it she left Benson to watch for the young lady's waking (there was no doubt about the genuineness of the sleep she was enjoying at present), and stole back to her own room, where she found her husband just opening his eyes, and wondering why his wife had risen before him. On her explaining that it was still very early, and that she had been nearly all night with his sick daughter, David's admiration and gratitude knew no bounds; but he insisted


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that Margaret should remain in bed till late in the day, and he *would* get up himself immediately to see about her breakfast, and to send her maid to light a fire for her.

Margaret did not oppose him, for she guessed that he was also anxious to satisfy himself, by a personal inspection, that Elizabeth did not resemble a spotted leopard this morning; and indeed the poor little woman was sufficiently tired and chilled from her unaccustomed vigils, to be unspeakably thankful to be left alone.

After she had taken what she could of the dainty breakfast her husband sent up to her, with many affectionate charges that she should make a good meal, her aching eyes closed instinctively, and she slept for several hours soundly and refreshingly.

Amy was standing by her bedside when, at last, she awoke, David having sent his youngest daughter to cheer his wife with the intelligence that the doctor had been, and



that he did not think now there was any fear of Elizabeth being sickening for scarlet fever. She had a dreadful cold, and was still very unwell; but by keeping to her room for a few days, and being carefully nursed, Dr. Emerson was of opinion that she would soon get over her indisposition.

"And papa is so glad," concluded Amy, "that I thought he would never have finished shaking hands with Dr. Emerson. I have told Elizabeth, because I want her to take in the full extent of the anxiety she has excited. Oh, and Mr. Spenser has called, and papa has asked him to stay to lunch."

Margaret wondered, for a moment, why this information was given last, and why Amy half turned her head away while she was giving it. Then the observant step-mother ceased to wonder, only smiling a little quiet smile to herself, and deciding that, with a humble, grateful, absorbent nature like Amy's, it was very far from unnatural.


"It seems, then, that I must get up without more delay," she said, briskly, "though to find myself here at nearly one o'clock, is enough to confuse a stronger brain than mine, Amy. Tell me, however, before you go, what sort of mood Elizabeth is in to-day, and whether she still seems annoyed at my having spent part of the night with her."

"She is very quiet," Amy answered, "and I think exceedingly depressed. She has not alluded directly to your having gone to her in the night; but, as I know you would wish for the truth, she said both to papa and to me, at different times, 'Mind, I cannot have anybody coming to my room to-day. It only excites and worries me, however well-meant.' We suppose by 'anybody,' which was strongly emphasized, she meant you, and papa thinks, and so do I, that it is shamefully ungrateful."

"Well, never mind, dear," replied Margaret, faintly smiling, "sick people are

privileged to be a little cross-grained, and, of course, being on the terms we are, my going unasked to your sister's room may have seemed to her an intrusion. Run away now, Amy, and entertain the Rector till I join you. I don't think your papa and he care much for each other's society."

But David, being in a splendid humour that day, was unusually friendly and agreeable to Mr. Spenser, who had come to tell Margaret there were no cases of fever in Ditchley, and that if she or Amy had any business there, he believed they might go with perfect safety. He stayed for a good long time after lunch, and the weather being bright and dry, had a walk in the grounds with the two ladies. Margaret judged that it was well for her husband to see her often in the Rector's society, that he might the sooner get over that foolish, unacknowledged jealousy, which (had she ever betrayed the least disposition to avoid her former suitor,



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or evinced consciousness of any kind when he was their guest) might have grown into a very formidable and troublesome enemy to their domestic peace. . She hoped, too, that by-and-by there would be an evident and unanswerable reason for David's mind to be for ever at rest on the subject.

Before the post went out that day, Margaret wrote a full account to Rhoda of all that she had heard from Mr. Perkins, asking if it would not be well now, when the danger appeared so imminent, to reveal to Mr. Fletcher as much as they themselves knew concerning Elizabeth's attachment to her cousin. "I will speak to her, myself, about these meetings if she will only give me a chance," the writer added; "but her icy manner to me always, makes a confidential talk nearly an impossibility."


The next day Elizabeth was pronounced to be going on satisfactorily, but was on no account to leave her room, or to be

subjected to any exciting influences. The pulse was still much too quick and feverish, Dr. Emerson said; and he added a private opinion to the father that the young lady had something on her mind, which was keeping up this abnormal physical agitation.

David repeated the doctor's words to Elizabeth when he next went to see her, asking anxiously if this could be the case, and entreating her to tell him, frankly, if it were so.

"What a fool that man is!" replied the young lady, with a face that changed from red to white with startling abruptness. "He knows about as much about my mind as he does about my body. I won't see him any more. People don't want doctors for a cold, and I am sick to death of being fussed over."

Nevertheless, David, judging this to be an equivocal reply, begged Margaret to make an excuse for going to the perverse girl that



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evening, urging that her woman's wit would help her to find out whatever there might be to discover, far sooner than any qualifications *he* possessed for so delicate a mission.

Poor Margaret felt absolutely guilty in accepting this errand, and but for the dread of giving her husband pain, and changing all his recent gladness into wrath and bitterness, she would, then and there, have revealed to him her burdensome secret. It was cruelly hard to keep it to herself, but it would have been even harder to wound, without dire necessity, the tender-hearted man whose happiness she had made the chief care of her life. To-morrow she might hear from Rhoda, or to-night she might even find an opening for speaking to Elizabeth. Anything seemed easier and better to this devoted wife than a rash disclosure to her sensitive and excitable husband, of his daughter's ill-judged and reprehensible conduct.

Elizabeth was sitting in an easy-chair by the fire when her stepmother, having first knocked at the door, went half hesitatingly into the room. In a most becoming invalid cap, and wrapped in a soft white shawl, the young lady looked remarkably pretty, though the fine eyes,—her chief attraction,—were nearly closed, and her whole aspect denoted weariness and lack of interest in anything that life just now was offering her.

She started and frowned when she discovered who it was she had authorized to enter, but on Margaret saying she had not come to remain long, only just to see if the cold was really getting better, Elizabeth invited her to a chair opposite her own, and was polite enough to open her eyes a suspicion wider than they had been during her solitude. She said also—

“I have to thank you for sitting up with me the other night, though you know, and

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I suppose you knew then, that I hated your doing it. Amy told me you were very tired the next morning, and I am sure it is no wonder. I hope you have quite recovered now."

"Oh, dear, yes," smiled Margaret, "but there was, in fact, nothing to recover from. I was only sleepy, and I slept till the middle of the day. I am afraid you were the real victim in the case, as indeed you have just acknowledged."

Elizabeth's lips stirred faintly, though it was scarcely a smile that appeared upon them.

"Some people," she said, playing rather nervously with the fringe of her shawl, "like having a great to-do made with them, if only their little finger aches. I do not. I had courted this attack of mine by driving out in an open carriage—at least I am told so—and it irritated me that anybody should think it necessary to suffer with me."

"And yet," replied Margaret, groping blindly for the opening she was longing to find, "suffering that we bring on ourselves is not always the easiest to bear; the reverse is often the case—don't you think so? though, perhaps, it is a subject on which you have not, *as yet*, been led to form an opinion."

"I never form opinions;" said Elizabeth, lazily, "it would be far too tedious a process. Of course I believe certain things, and I disbelieve others. When my mother died, I suffered as much as a human creature *can* suffer, and nobody could assert that I brought that misfortune on myself."


"No;" replied Margaret, not encouraged in her undertaking by this allusion to the dead lady in the cemetery—"and I earnestly hope, my dear, you will never, in any future trouble that may befall you, have the sting of self-reproach to intensify it. You must forgive me," she added, with her own peculiarly winning smile, "if I speak in the

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warning tone of an elder. I cannot help, as your father's wife, feeling a very strong interest in the children to whom he is so passionately devoted."

This was a very fair shot, and must have gone near a vital part, judging by the sudden pallor that overspread Elizabeth's face, and the expression of bitter annoyance which it assumed.

"I am sure it is very good and very generous of you to feel this interest," she said, with an attempt (which, however, was eminently unsuccessful) at a careless smile. "I don't think many in your position would do so. You see, step-mothers are amongst the institutions I never *have* believed in; but it is possible that my scepticism may have been altogether wrong. If it has been, you must leave me to recover from it in my own way. I am slow in imbibing new impressions, and just now I am, you know, under a special cloud, and hazy to the last



degree. Won't papa think you are a long time away from him?"

"I will go in a minute," answered Margaret, half amused at the very broad hint, and yet trembling at the fear that she should, after all, accomplish nothing—"but I just wanted to say one word about this dinner party of ours next week. Of course, your cold will be an admirable excuse for your not appearing at dinner; but if you could make the effort of coming down for even an hour in the evening, I am sure it would give Mr. Fletcher infinite gratification. I do earnestly wish you, my dear, to take in how very dearly your father loves you."


This last clause was, in point of fact, the gist of the brief appeal, and Elizabeth appeared to understand it as such. Again she grew painfully white, and her lips trembled visibly, as she said, after a minute's struggling with her very manifest agitation,

"Why do you harp so upon my father's

love for me to-night? I have not called it in question ; I have not, that I am aware, done anything to wound him recently ; I have not——”

Here her voice shook so much that she seemed quite unable to proceed, and Margaret, compassionating her distress, took the words out of her mouth, rising at the same time, to show that she was really going now.

“You have not, *as yet*, done him any wrong that you may not easily repair,” she said, strongly and significantly emphasizing the words ‘as yet,’ though, in truth, she was scarcely less agitated than the culprit she was addressing ; “and I entreat you, Elizabeth, by all your hopes of happiness, to let the future, as regards this devoted father, atone for the past. Never, never deceive or wilfully disobey him, for I am certain it would break his heart. Now good night, my dear child. Think of what I have said about the evening of the nineteenth ;



and forgive me for having, as I fear, tired you out now."

Elizabeth yielded her ice-cold hand to her step-mother's warm clasp, but she spoke not another word, beyond the formal "good night," which courtesy enjoined—and Margaret went out of the room with almost a rejoicing spirit, convinced that at least Elizabeth had understood her, and that the girl's better feelings had been powerfully stirred.

There was nothing, of course, to tell David, except that the interview had not been an unfriendly one, and though he regretted that his wife had not succeeded in looking closer into his daughter's jealously locked heart, he had enough of trust in the former to be assured that she would eventually win her way even into that guarded sanctuary. These sort of impulsive natures invariably believe that everything will turn out as they wish it to do, until the least reverse or disappointment comes, when they

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are quite as ready to feel positive that all good is cut off from them for ever.

Rhoda's answer to Margaret's letter arrived the next morning, and contained the following information—

“ My brother is again in town, and in such a bad temper—bad even for him—that I cannot think he has been happy in his wooing. I know that he is in desperate want of money, and that my mother, in spite of her adoration of him, dreads his visits, and generally has a fit of hysterical crying after he has been with her. I should not *think*, therefore, that there can be any fear of immediate action on the part of poor E——; but, as I *may* be mistaken, I wish you, dear Aunt Margaret, to use your own judgment entirely in the affair. I would rather break my promise to my mother than that mischief—such terrible mischief as this—should come of my keeping it. Nevertheless, knowing Uncle David as I do, I should be very glad

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to have him spared, *if possible*, the miserable excitement and anger your revelation would occasion him. I hope soon to send you word that Herbert is safe over the water again.

“In haste,

“Your ever affectionate and anxious

“RHODA.”

This letter quite decided Margaret on holding her tongue for the present. David was very happy just now; their inevitable dinner party was close at hand; Elizabeth was a prisoner in her own room, besides being, as her sanguine step-mother hoped, under the influence of altogether softened and amended feelings; and, above all, Herbert Meredith was seventy odd miles away, if not on his road to the Continent.

Would it not be a reckless courting of trouble and confusion, to betray Elizabeth's secret at this particular juncture? not to mention that it might act as a sudden ex-

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tinguisher upon whatever good resolutions the poor misguided girl had herself formed !

At any rate, this was Margaret's train of reasoning ; and, as it fell in with her inclinations, she very naturally welcomed it cordially, and suffered her anxieties to sleep peacefully for a while.

She kept away from Elizabeth's room for a couple of days succeeding their last recorded interview, less because of any unwillingness to go there on her own account, than from the idea that Elizabeth might feel uncomfortable in seeing her so soon after what she had hinted of her knowledge of the young lady's private affairs. From David and Amy she learned that the invalid was by turns excessively irritable and painfully depressed. Sometimes she would not speak a word to either of them when they went in to sit with her, but would remain with her head resting on her hand, gazing abstractedly or gloomily into the fire, or pretend to be deeply


absorbed in the book or journal she had probably only taken up on hearing footsteps approaching her door.

Dr. Emerson, who was consulted on the mysterious subject, recommended that these strange moods should be ignored by those who were chiefly about his patient, that she should be treated gently and kindly, but not receive undue attention, and that, as soon as it was safe for her to get out again, she should be taken quite away for a change.

"*Taken* away, mind, not sent alone," added the doctor, with decision. "In these sort of cases, young ladies require a little careful watching, which none but their own personal friends are likely to give them."

By which speech Margaret was led to believe that some hint of those clandestine meetings in Ditchley had reached Dr. Emerson, and that he had spoken on the strength of the knowledge he had acquired.

"We will all go to London," David said, stifling a sigh, in reference to his own abhor-



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rence of the gay city, when Margaret and himself were alone after the doctor's visit. "I suppose this will be the best plan we could adopt; and, as you, my love, first suggested it, you shall be the one to tell Elizabeth what we are proposing. Will you go and see her to-night?"

Margaret replied that she would. It wanted now but two days of the dinner party, and she was anxious to ascertain whether Elizabeth had any intention of coming down after dinner. Also, she was a little curious to see how her step-daughter would receive her, cherishing the hope that she had gained at least an inch of vantage ground at their last interview, and that this would be apparent at the next meeting.

But it was not. Elizabeth, whom she found, not sitting over the fire this time, but pacing her room with restless excitement in every step, bestowed upon her visitor a very cool welcome, continuing her

exercise, and asking Margaret if she had come on any special errand.

"Well, yes," replied the latter, chilled and disappointed, for her heart had been gradually warming towards this poor, erring girl, during the last two days. "Your father sent me to-night, to tell you something that he thought would give you pleasure. May I stay for a minute or two, now that I am here, or do you wish me to deliver my message and go?"

"Pray do as you like," was the cold, ungracious answer, though Margaret, looking at the speaker, could see plainly that the face was not in sympathy either with the voice or the words, that it expressed a degree of passionate sorrow and sadness which left no room for simple annoyance, or for the cool indifference the whole manner was intended to convey.

"Then I will sit for a minute," said Margaret, taking a chair by the fire, and

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leaving Elizabeth free space to wander up and down in. "You are fast getting better, are you not? You will, I earnestly hope, be well enough to join us for an hour on Thursday?"


"I think you mentioned," answered the young lady stiffly, "that you came with some message from my father. I would rather not talk about Thursday till it arrives."

"Well, I shall live in hope," said Margaret cheerfully, though cheerfulness seemed almost an insult to the other's profound and settled gloom. "I meant to have told you what Amy is going to wear, and to have asked your advice concerning various little details; but you are not in spirits to-night, and I should weary instead of interesting you. I must, however, give you your father's message. It is that we are all to go to London for a few months soon after Christmas. My friends, the Dormers, will look

out for a house for us at once, at least I shall write to ask them to do so to-morrow. Amy will have masters while we are there, and you, my dear, will be able to amuse yourself in any way you please. Now, let me have the satisfaction of telling your father that his news has really pleased you. It would make him so happy for the rest of the evening."

Margaret came to a full stop here, and waited in some anxiety for the reply. None was vouchsafed at first, only Elizabeth ceased her troubled march, and, standing motionless as if suddenly turned to stone in the middle of the room, clasped her hands rigidly together, fixed her eyes, under which dark circles were beginning to appear, on the opposite wall, and seemed, for the moment, to have dropped every link that bound her to the outer world.

But, just as Mrs. Fletcher—startled and alarmed no less than mystified—was on the



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point of going up to her, and inquiring what was the matter, Elizabeth recovered her self-possession, and, turning quietly, though still with something of abstraction in her set face, to her companion, said, in the same hard, cold voice she had assumed before—

“Tell him I thank him for his kindness in wishing me to be pleased. I *am* pleased, of course. Amy ought to have masters, and you will like being near your friends, and Rhoda. Now good-night, Mrs. Fletcher. I am too poor company to ask you to stay; and besides, I must walk about, having been in doors so long.”

Margaret rose and went; but she was fairly puzzled by the observations she had made this evening, and, thinking it all over when she was alone, she came to the conclusion that she must tell her husband everything, as soon as their tiresome dinner party had come off.

CHAPTER III.

THE BIRD FLOWN.

FOR the next two days Mrs. David Fletcher was too incessantly occupied with her house-keeper (being perhaps a little over-anxious that her first dinner should be a success), to have much time either for thinking uneasily of Elizabeth, or for forcing her evidently unwelcome visits upon the perverse young lady. But, on the morning of the important day, she sent a message by Amy to the effect that she was still hoping to see her eldest step-daughter down-stairs in the evening. On pressing the younger sister to say exactly how this message had been received,

Margaret learned that it had met with scanty favour.

"I wish to goodness you would all leave me alone," Elizabeth had answered sharply and impatiently. "I am not looking so well or so handsome that I should desire to show myself to a parcel of criticizing fine ladies and gentlemen. Tell Mrs. Fletcher so, and add, if you please, that I am as likely to come without a promise as with one. I cannot be bothered about this stupid matter again."

"And she does look so dreadfully ill," Amy supplemented on her own account, "that I can scarcely be astonished at her not wanting the trouble of dressing. However, Elizabeth is so strange and incomprehensible lately, that perhaps she intends all the time to do what you have asked her."

David, notwithstanding his indolence and shrinking from society, had been roused to take a little interest in the forthcoming

party, from seeing how indefatigable his wife was working to ensure its going off well, and also from the conviction that she was herself eminently fitted to shine as the mistress of his house, and the successor to the cold, repelling woman who had so long caused that home to be shunned above every other of like pretensions in the county. He was, therefore, in one of his best and most genial moods when he took his place at the head of his elegantly adorned table, and looked across at his charming and graceful wife doing the honours at the bottom.

Amy, too, having had her toilette carefully attended to by Margaret, who had also contrived to get her seated on one side of the Rector, was looking unusually bright and pretty; and David, exulting in the two of his family who were present, felt that it only required the absent member—the queenly Elizabeth—to be doing her part at his right hand, to make his satisfaction complete.

Margaret had, however, given him a faint hope that his eldest daughter would appear in the evening, and so David Fletcher consoled himself, and, on this occasion, really shone amongst his fellows as he had never shone before.

Many of the guests at that memorable dinner thought it afterwards a striking coincidence that the conversation should have turned, towards the end, on elopements and runaway marriages. But, in point of fact, a somewhat recent and very romantic incident in the neighbourhood had not unnaturally suggested it. A young lady of high birth had gone off with her brother's tutor, and the father had sternly refused to take any steps to arrest the fugitives, declaring that a girl who could so act was wholly unfit to mingle with her pure and unoffending sisters again, and that as she had made her bed, so she should lie on it, for him.

A few of the gentlemen at table expressed

their strong disapprobation of this unfor-
giving father's conduct, and said that had it
been their case, they would have moved
heaven and earth to overtake their poor
foolish child, and bring her back, before she
had sealed her fate ; but David, to his wife's
astonishment, declared, in most emphatic
terms, that he would have acted as the young
lady's father had done, that he would neither
seek to bring back, nor ever receive again
(unless she was deserted by her husband,
and came as a penitent), a daughter who
could forget and forego all sacred home
affections, on behalf of a stranger who told
her she was fair, and that he loved her.

"In nine instances out of ten, it is her money
only he loves," concluded the usually taciturn
master of the Hall, becoming quite warm
with his subject, "but the girl has earned
the bitterness of such a discovery, and re-
quires quite as sharp a rod to teach her
womanliness and prudence."

As Margaret, soon after this discussion, led the way to the drawing-room, followed by her elegantly-attired lady guests, she could not help contrasting her present position and feelings, with her position and feelings on the last occasion of her making one of a somewhat similar party in the same house—the evening of her first introduction to Mr. Fletcher's daughters, and of that never forgotten scene in the boudoir with Miss Elizabeth.

Things were changed now, and she, who had been then scorned and insulted, reigned at present as supreme head of the establishment, respected, honored and beloved by nearly all around her, and thoroughly satisfied with her individual share of this world's goodly bestowments.

It was impossible not to feel grateful, as her mind took a rapid survey of her many blessings, almost impossible, too (though Margaret Fletcher was not less meek a

woman at heart than Margaret Bellew had been), not to feel slightly triumphant as well, in the contemplation of what she had already achieved. David was, on the whole, a happy man, growing brighter and cheerfuller day by day. Amy was entirely won; Elizabeth, her great and formidable difficulty, was beginning to show symptoms of yielding. Every servant in the house was devoted to the mistress, and in the neighbourhood Mrs. David Fletcher was as popular as any of the matrons who had taken double the time that she had to earn their meed of general esteem and liking.

There *was* something in all this (to which must be added her husband's devoted love and admiration) calculated to lift any little woman, whose previous life had been painted in the coldest neutral tints, a good way up into the clouds, and Margaret must not be severely judged, if on this special evening, she was conscious of some unusual elation,

some feeling which brought a rich colour into her cheeks, and quite a sparkling light into the soft, tender eyes.

When the gentlemen came in, Mr. Spenser paused a moment by the side of his attractive hostess.

"I never," he said warmly, as if the remark had been irresistibly drawn from him, "saw you looking so well, or so happy as you are looking to-night. I wish Mrs. Bellew were here. What have you been doing to yourself?"

"I was going to answer 'nothing,'" Margaret laughingly replied, "but that would scarcely be true in the spirit, though it might be in the letter. I have not *done* anything to myself, in the way of painting my cheeks, which I can feel are frightfully red; but I have been thinking fast and hard, since I left the dinner table, and my thoughts have made me grateful and—yes, I may add with all sincerity—and happy."

"I am very glad," the Rector said in a low voice, which had only just a tinge of sadness in it, "but I believe you would be happy under nearly any circumstances, for your mind is a well-balanced one, and inclines you to discover sunshine, more or less brilliant, everywhere."

"But I have not far to look to discover the sunshine in which I am actually walking," said Margaret, not quite knowing whether this good man meant to disparage the lot she had chosen. "What more than I possess, could any woman desire to make her happy?"

"I don't know," Mr. Spenser replied, with a half smile at the apparent *naïveté* of the question. "I am a man, you see, and cannot judge for women; you have still a rather hard trial with Miss Elizabeth, I fear."

"But I hope and believe it will not be a long one now," said Margaret cheerfully,

“ this slight illness has softened the girl—I am certain of that ; and though, as yet, it is only the day of small things with her, we will not despise it, but rather look upon it as the sure harbinger of greater. Will you go now and help poor Amy with those young gentlemen, who seem teasing her to ‘favour them with a tune,’ and are, I expect, a little too much for her ; and then have some coffee yourself—it is being carried round.”

Margaret knew better than to allow one of her male guests to monopolize her entirely, and she would prevent, if possible, a single shadow appearing on David’s unusually bright and animated face to-night.


After playing two or three short pieces herself, and getting the other musical ladies of the party to display their talents, either vocally or instrumentally, Margaret took an opportunity of whispering to Amy that she must act as hostess for a little while, as it was now time to go and see after Elizabeth.

The evening was wearing on, and if this absent member of the family, and, as far as beauty went, its chief ornament, intended to show herself, she must do it at once. Many of the guests had come from a distance, and would have been quite sure to have ordered their carriages early.

So, running lightly up the stairs, and giving her customary gentle knock at Elizabeth's door, Mrs. David Fletcher stood waiting patiently for a minute, engrossed in her own thoughts, for the response from within. As this was delayed, the knock was presently repeated, but though it had been a little louder the second time, the result was the same.

"Surely," reflected Margaret, "she cannot have fallen asleep over the fire. Girls of her age seldom sleep till they go to bed, and Elizabeth is anything but a sleepy subject."

Nevertheless, as a third, and, this time a



decidedly noisy appeal, met with no better success than its pioneers, the tired waiter outside became sufficiently anxious to open the door softly, and to walk in.


No fire, beyond a few rapidly expiring cinders at the bottom of the grate ; no light, except a small untrimmed lamp on the dressing table. No human presence, of any kind, to explain this strange state of things, or rather, as poor Margaret's suddenly faint and sinking heart expressed to herself the situation—" *No Elizabeth !* "

What her first distinct thought was she could never afterwards very accurately remember, bewilderment for awhile predominating over all else ; but as soon as she succeeded in even partially recalling her truant wits, Margaret advanced farther into the deserted room, an instinct, more than a feeling, loudly whispering to her that whatever was to be discovered she must be the one to discover it, whatever shock was to be

sustained, she must be the first to sustain it.

And then came, like a sudden breath of cold air, and exciting momentarily a curious wonder at the mysteries of human life, the thought of her late secret triumph and unwonted realization of the smoothness and pleasantness of her earthly lot. Had she sinned, in thus wrapping herself in her natural complacency, in thus priding herself upon what she had attained, in the way of human dignity and happiness. Was she to be rebuked, like the man in the parable, who said to his soul—"Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease; eat, drink, and be merry"?

Poor Margaret was already writing bitter things against herself, not because her reason told her it was just, for reason had had no time to be heard at present, but because she saw the thunder clouds above her head, and, in her shrinking fear, was groping




wildly for an explanation of their abrupt gathering in the blue skies, whose calmness had been so sweet to her.

The practical details of the trouble which had come upon her and hers, were but as a succession of little malicious sword-pricks round the one wound which she had received, when the first consciousness of what it all meant broke upon her half dulled senses. And thus by the light of that miserable lamp on the dressing table, and shivering from head to foot in the atmosphere of the fireless room, Margaret was yet enabled to read, with some degree of composure, the letter which she found placed in the neighbourhood of the lamp, with her own name on the carefully sealed envelope.

These were Elizabeth Fletcher's parting words to her stepmother—

“I address you as the one member of my family who will naturally shrink the least from the gulf I am opening this day between

myself and you all for ever. I am so utterly and entirely miserable, that I scarcely know what I write, and you will have to take for granted much that I shall fail to say to you. One thing I *must* say, while enough of clear-mindedness remains to permit of my saying it comprehensively. *It* was all settled before that night, the night when you came to watch beside me, and when my father nearly maddened me by the affection and anxiety he exhibited. Believe this, Mrs. Fletcher, I entreat of you, if you believe no other words of mine for ever. I had given my cousin, Herbert Meredith, a solemn promise, and I *dared not* break it. He will be my husband in less than twenty-four hours from the present time. He loves me, and I love him devotedly; and yet I do not expect to be happy. Of course I know I am doing wrong, vilely wrong, it seems to me now, and still I do it. My father thinks ill of Herbert, and would never have cou-



sented to my marrying a cousin, and a member of his first wife's family. He will bitterly resent my disobedience, and no doubt cast me off altogether. Once, I should have thought this a light calamity. I don't know very well how I regard it now, for indeed all my emotions seem strange and bewildering to me ; but I do know that I feel, and have felt these many days past, as if my heart were breaking, and that I wish it would break and have done with it.

“ When I began this letter, I believe my chief object was to thank you for being patient with me, as indeed you have been from the first ; but I seem to lack words for all I really desire to say. I am so miserable, so friendless, and though I am going to marry the man I love, the future looks as black and dreary to me as the present, and I have not enough spirit left in me now to shape it otherwise if I could. But I could *not*, even if I knew that my father would

curse me, if I knew that I was killing my own soul and body by what I am doing, I must do it all the same. I am bound to Herbert for good or ill, through life unto death, and I wish my own family to look upon me henceforth as dead to them. Should my father have one wild thought of pursuing me, I charge you to tell him that it would be more than useless. By this act of mine, I separate myself from home and kindred for ever. Let no one, not even poor little innocent Amy, regret me. I am not worth it. I would far rather be forgotten utterly by you all. I will write once when the marriage ring is on my finger, and I can sign myself by the name I shall henceforth bear. After that, silence will be best,—at least, I think so now. I meant, originally, to go quite alone from my father's house, as Herbert will be waiting for me close at hand, but I have become, physically, so weak and ill from the mental tortures I have endured,

that I fear to do this, lest I should, in the beginning, be an anxiety and a burden to *him*. So I take Benson, who is wholly innocent of any complicity in my wrong doing, never having heard of my plans till to-day ; and I shall send her back to her friends, or to Amy, if you will suffer her to resume her place here, in a week or two. We shall not be living in England, and even if we were, I should have to forego, for some time, the luxury of a maid to myself. You see my eyes are quite open to all the conditions of the destiny I have chosen. I have nothing more, I believe, to add, except that I trust to you to comfort my father if he needs comforting. With you and Amy alone, he will, by-and-by, be a far happier man than had I remained to trouble his peace. My last word of all must be ‘thank you for having believed in me, even after you must have gained some knowledge of my secret doings.’ Don’t let my guilt be

increased by shaking your faith in human nature. Some unfortunates are doomed from their birth, and I am one of them.

“Yours, gratefully, at least,

“ELIZABETH.”

CHAPTER IV.

DAVID REFUSING TO BE COMFORTED.

MARGARET'S first feeling when she had got through this strange, pathetic letter, which, unlike Elizabeth Fletcher's usual elegant epistles, was written carelessly, and with many blots, was one of deep and overwhelming pity for the girl's father, her strong conviction being that had the words she had just read been written by a daughter of her own, it would have killed her. Then the naturally practical bent of her mind forced upon her the consideration of what must be done, immediately, in this sad and terrible matter. She had already been away from her guests quite an unreasonable time, and

at any moment her husband might come up to Elizabeth's room in search of her. She would have liked to go straight to good old Mrs. Barrington, who had lived in the family before the present young generation was born, and who was warmly attached to her master ; but she knew that such a proceeding would involve far too much delay, and hasten the moment it was her earnest wish, if possible, to defer till the house was clear.

Margaret had too distinct and appalling a vision in her own mind of poor David's reception of the news she should have to give him, not to shrink, with positive horror, from the thought of stranger eyes looking on the scene. Their visitors would not probably remain above another hour at most, and if, during that time, she could disguise her own agitation and distress, and induce her husband to believe that Elizabeth's non-appearance was only indolence or another fit of caprice, she should have gained something

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for him, something for which he would, hereafter, thank her, when the first passion of his grief and anger allowed his extreme sensitiveness and shyness of his fellow-men to come into the front once more.

With the above plan in her head—and who shall say with what sorrow and fear, and depths of wifely tenderness in her heart—Margaret hastened back to the drawing-room, only stepping, for one instant, into her own room in passing, to wrap a shawl around her half-frozen shoulders, and to wonder, as she caught a view of her blue cold face in the looking-glass, what Mr. Spenser would think of her brightness and comeliness, if he could see her *now*. But, rubbing and pinching her cheeks as she went down stairs, the poor little woman hoped their dismal deterioration within the last quarter of an hour would escape any special notice, and that, with the help of her strong will, she should be enabled to play her difficult part successfully.

David was standing very near the door as she went tremblingly in. He turned instantly from the gentleman with whom he had been conversing, and said—

“My love, what an age you have left us to our own devices. And how cold you look, and evidently are, by that fleecy shawl. Where is Elizabeth?”

“Oh, not coming down to-night,” Margaret answered, with an assumption of extraordinary airiness, that would probably have excited her husband’s suspicion had they been alone. “I did not much think she would, when it had grown so late; but I must go and release poor dear Amy from her duties, and set some of the ladies playing again. You have managed to get up a whist party yonder, I see.”

Then she hurried on, without waiting for a reply, and having made her apologies to those of her guests who had commented on her absence, and whispered to Amy that her

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labours were now at an end, she placed a young lady who sang loudly, if not sweetly, at the piano, said a gracious word or two to some who were amusing themselves, or feigning to be amused, with books and pictures ; and finally went with a calm step and mien to where the Rector was standing alone, inhaling the perfume from a *jardinière* of delicious hothouse flowers, and startled him by whispering, almost in his ear—

“Don’t go when the others do, and don’t, please, ask me any questions yet. I can only say, now, that I shall want you.”

He turned quickly round, looked at the speaker earnestly, looked till her lip trembled and the small amount of colour she had pinched into her cheeks quite deserted them again. Then he made her sit down, and walked straight off to a table, where a manservant had just deposited a tray with refreshments of every variety. Pouring out a glass of wine, he carried it over to his pale.

hostess, who received it gratefully, and tried to smile as she drank it up.

“You are the bravest woman I ever knew,” he said, admiringly. “But don’t overdo it, and waste your own strength unnecessarily. You have had a blow ; and, without laying claim to divining powers, I think I can guess from what quarter it has come. Can’t we manage to tamper with that clock on the mantelpiece, and so get all these people away sooner? You won’t keep up another hour.”

“Two hours even, if it was required, for my husband’s sake,” replied Margaret firmly, “but they are all weary, and will go presently. When the last has fairly gone, you must make some excuse for taking Amy into the dining-room, where the fire is still kept up, and the table spread for those who want substantial refreshments before leaving. I must have, perhaps, a quarter of an hour with Mr. Fletcher alone in here ! and then—I do not know how it will be, but I

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may be very thankful to have you close at hand. You will forgive my presuming upon your friendship for us all, even more than upon your office," she added wistfully. "And now I must return to the piano, and you might help me by talking to some of those women on the sofa, who are looking half asleep, and will, I am sure, be thankful enough when their carriages are announced."

In half an hour, the first departure took place, and twenty minutes later the last of Mrs. David Fletcher's guests (with the exception of Mr. Spenser) had said good night, and been driven rapidly over the hard, frosty ground from her husband's hospitable doors. Then the poor little wife, for a moment, breathed freely, but only to wish, the moment after, that she could bring everybody back, just to delay the terrible crisis which was now waiting for her to grapple with as best she could.

David was in excellent spirits. He walked to the fire as the door closed on the family party (for the Rector had lingered a minute in the hall, to say a parting word to somebody), and standing with his back against it, and facing his wife and Amy, he remarked how well everything had gone off, how charmingly Margaret had done the honours, and what a pity it was that Elizabeth had not been tempted to come down.

Before Margaret could think of any careless reply to make (for her heart was beating thick and tumultuously now), the door reopened to admit the Rector, and to him she gave the signal for carrying off Amy, and leaving her alone to her dreadful and dreaded task.

Probably he would have preferred to stay and help her in it, but he knew that David Fletcher's wife meant what she said when she had spoken of being alone with her husband; and, as her friend, it was his part to do simply what she had asked of him.

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An excuse of wanting a sandwich and a glass of wine, before braving the cold night air, was easily found and acted on. Amy would come and give him his supper, and he would return to the drawing-room afterwards, to make his adieux to his host and hostess.

So they went—Amy's gentle little face none the less bright for the errand that had been assigned her—and husband and wife were alone together.

Wholly unconscious of anything wrong as yet, David drew his pale companion to him and kissed her fondly, remarking that she was very tired, and hoping that their reverend friend would go as soon as he had despatched his sandwich. After this, he was taking up the thread of his interrupted observations about the party and Elizabeth's lamented absence, when his wife laid her hand lightly and with infinite tenderness on his arm, and stopped him.

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"David," she said, her voice, through utter weakness sinking almost to the lowest whisper, "I have something to tell you, something that I feared to tell you while all those people were here ; though indeed, it has cost me more than these white cheeks indicate to keep it from you so long, and to smile and talk as usual, knowing what I knew. My dear husband I can't prepare you for the shock, my own strength is all exhausted now; but I am here, thank God ! to bear the trouble with you, to wrap my love around you, to give you all the sympathy and tenderness the most devoted wife can give. David, Elizabeth has left us—"

He had listened with outward quietness till now, too much surprised at first to take in the meaning of anything he was hearing with his bodily ears ; but as Margaret spoke the last words, slowly and solemnly, the father's mind was abruptly roused to grasp at the only idea they suggested to him.

With a passionate cry, that appeared a mixture of incredulity and anguish, he wrenched his arm from his wife's gentle hold, started back a few paces from her, and exclaimed wildly—

“Dead, did you say *dead*, or did you mean dead? Speak plainly, in Heaven's name, now, unless you wish to madden or to kill me!”

“Oh, not dead, nothing like that,” Margaret hastened to say, too full of pity for her husband to heed that he had addressed her with a stern look, and in a tone that seemed to ignore all the tender, loving consideration of hers to him; “only gone away from us to her lover, the man she has chosen for a husband—her cousin, Herbert Meredith.”

She paused here, for David had suddenly dropped his arms at his side, as if they were paralyzed, and had sunk heavily upon the couch near which he and his wife were

standing. He did not speak, he did not groan, but his eyes were dilated in an unnatural manner, and his breath came in such hard, stifling gasps, that Margaret in her ignorance and deadly fear, thought he was going to have a fit of some sort.

Even in this extremity her instinct was to guard him as long as she could, from all observation but her own. She had never yet seen any man under the immediate influence of excessive mental suffering, but she knew that the stronger sex have often little command over themselves in moments of sore trial; and she felt that her poor David would be amongst those who let the waves and the billows engulf them unresistingly, without one vigorous effort to keep the head above water.

Throwing her arms round him now with a touching impulse, and yearning to put all her feeble woman's strength into him, she poured forth words of gentlest love and

sympathy, of entreaty that he would strive for her sake and his other child's to bear this trouble manfully, to look it bravely in the face at once, to consider what might still be done to mitigate its bitterness. Elizabeth had done wrong, had cruelly deceived her father ; but she was very young, and she loved this cousin.

David's startled and wandering senses returned to him abruptly, as Margaret, scarcely knowing what she said, named the man who had robbed him of his daughter.

"The villain, the cold-blooded, heartless, calculating scoundrel !" he exclaimed, between his clenched teeth ; "my curse be upon him for ever and ever ! Margaret, you heard me declare to-night that I would never seek to bring back a daughter who had run away from her home. I will not seek to bring this girl back, but I would thank God if I could see her dead before me, as I speak these wild words ; for she is linking herself

to one who will poison every hour of her existence, and break her heart, if she has a heart, at last. Now, while I can listen to you with any degree of comprehension, tell me all you know, and tell it without weak attempts to soften the hard truth. If I am less fitted to bear trouble than other men—sometimes” (passing his shaking hand over his clammy forehead, and looking piteously at his wife) “I think I am—I am ready, at least, to bow my head beneath the full violence of the storm, and to let it do its worst upon me. The Creator, who fashioned me as I am, knows how I have loved my children;—but go on, Margaret—I am calmer than I seem.”

Then Margaret, taking a low stool at his feet, and clasping his burning hands in her own, told him everything she knew of the affair, except what Rhoda had so long ago confided to her. This she thought it unnecessary now to reveal, as David would

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naturally come to the conclusion that the cousins had met oftener than he had been at all aware of in Paris, and there contracted the engagement which Elizabeth had only too faithfully kept. The wrapt and stony listener had, apparently, made a vow to himself not to interrupt the speaker till her tale was done, for he spoke not a single word during its progress, only, when Margaret confessed to having being informed of the clandestine meetings, he started violently, withdrew his hands sharply from hers, and looked at her with a cold astonishment that not all the subsequent explanations (expressive as these were of her tenderness and consideration for himself) modified to any noticeable extent.

"She might have been saved!" he said at last, in a voice of such utter and pathetic misery, that it thrilled through every fibre of his wife's being, causing her heart to die within her, and all her brave spirit to fail.

For what could she do for her poor husband if he had lost confidence in her, and become estranged in the very hour when he most needed her sympathy and support! One more struggle, at least, she would make.

“David, David!” she cried, her voice and streaming eyes attesting to the extent of her suffering, “do not look at me so coldly; do not break my heart. I did everything with a view of sparing *you* needless pain. I never, never thought of this happening. I believed that the poor child was fast being won to love you, and to tolerate me. But she must have been under an all powerful influence first. She says in her letter that she had given a solemn promise to her cousin. No doubt he had bound her by some oath that she would fear to break. But oh, David, if I have erred in judgment, it has been through my love for you. Forgive me, and let me have a wife’s privilege of clinging

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closer to you, and comforting you a little in this trying hour."

"She might have been saved!" David repeated, in the same tone of bitter anguish, and appearing not to have taken in a syllable of all his wife had been saying; "my poor, poor mad child, who has rushed into the very jaws of death, without a hand stretched out to arrest her. Now, it is too late, though I should move heaven and earth to accomplish it. They would have reached the station within an hour of her going off, and be far on their way to the north by this time. That fiend will take good care to have the knot tied quickly, so that he may be secure of the money, for which alone he has stolen her. Margaret, Margaret," with his first excitement returning, "I think I have got my death-blow. Where is Amy? Let me, at least, have my other child with me now."

Margaret rose slowly, her face white to

the lips, her whole frame trembling violently.

"I will fetch her David," she said, hoarsely.

And he never knew what it was to his poor, fond, faithful wife, to be put away, and treated as a stranger, just when the first serious occasion had arisen for the exercise of that ministry of love to which she had, with such perfect hope and trustfulness, devoted her life.

CHAPTER V.

THE ADVANTAGE OF MARRYING A WIDOWER.

How Margaret's physical strength held out for all that had yet to be done that night, she wondered much at the time, and wondered more afterwards. How she stayed her tears, and the throbbing of her aching heart, to tell the Rector and Amy, in a decently composed voice, all that it was imperative they should learn, how, having sent the latter, amazed and terrified, to her father, she lingered to answer some questions of Mr. Spenser's, and to assure him (with many thanks) that he could do nothing further for her now; how she listened, without any

visible emotion beyond a quivering lip and a convulsed throat, to his kind and compassionate words, and saw in his face deeper sympathy than he would have thought it right to express, were all separate mysteries to the poor little wife, who felt, throughout the whole ordeal, as if every moment would be the last of her endurance, and nature assert its rights at any cost of dignity or pride, or the more laudable wish to spare others the knowledge of her bitter grief and disenchantment.

"Don't ask me to talk more to-night," she said, pleadingly and humbly, when the Rector, filling up the bare outline she had given him, evinced a strong unwillingness to leave her. "I am tired, and want to get some rest. I *can* get some, you know, while Amy is with her father."

"But you will not," he replied, incredulously. "I wish I could go home believing that you would. I wish, too," looking

earnestly into the white quivering face, "that you would allow me to bring your mother to you. It is not too late for this. Your own carriage could be ready in ten minutes. The father and child will do their mourning together, and you—you, dear Mrs. Fletcher, who have had the whole brunt of the thing to bear hitherto, will feel left out—alone. Do let me bring Mrs. Bellew."

In any less overwhelming trouble, Margaret would have laughed, and been irresistibly amused at so very startling a proposition—startling, at least, as regarded the individual who was the subject of it. Even now a fleeting smile crossed the pale lips, as the daughter answered—

"You are very, very good, but you might as well suggest bringing up Ditchley church, and stowing it in our grounds, as bringing up my mother to the Hall to-night. I should be grateful, however, if you will go to her to-morrow, and tell her what has

happened. She may choose to visit me in my home, now that it has become a house of mourning ; and in any case it is right that she should learn our trouble at once, and in a message from me. You will do this errand for me ?”

“ This, and anything else in the world I can. May I come again, myself, to-morrow, just to ask how you all are ? Perhaps Mr. Fletcher will see me then.”

Margaret shook her head.

“ I do not think so ; but you may come when you like. I shall be glad to have news from Abbotsmead, and poor Amy will naturally welcome the sight of a friend’s face. The days that must ensue will be sad and heavy days for her ; and she is young yet to begin being a burden-bearer for others.”

“ And *you* are not old for it, though you take to it so readily,” said Margaret’s warm partizan. “ But you want me gone ; and I

see that you choose, and will always choose, to suffer, without human helpers. If I were a better and a holier man, my prayers might help you somewhat! but, at least, I can say my heart's desire for you is, that you may be abundantly supported now, and kept from all such, and other suffering, hereafter. Good-night."

"Good-night," faltered Margaret, not ungrateful for the Rector's affectionate sympathy and kindness, but conscious of an ever-increasing longing to be alone. "Don't let my mother think that this has touched me so nearly as *you* are fancying that it has. I am worn out now, but you will find me strong and brave again to-morrow."

A very difficult promise to keep, under all the circumstances that surrounded her, though Margaret, always telling herself that in marrying David Fletcher, she had not expected to sail calmly on the surface of an unruffled sea, did her utmost to rule her spirit, and to

keep in mind that those who profess to live for others must not be surprised when those others contentedly accept the sacrifice, and, growing used to it, often even forget that it is being made.

David tried for about half-an-hour to extract some comfort out of Amy's tears and sympathy, at moments (as she told Margaret afterwards) weeping passionately with her, at others, raving at Herbert Meredith, swearing he would never suffer Elizabeth to remain with such a villain, and bitterly accusing himself for having ever given her the chance of falling in love with her worthless cousin.

But, at the end of the half-hour, there came a sudden reaction from emotion of a merely sorrowful kind, and, ringing the bell violently, David ordered up every servant in the house, told them what had occurred, and forbade them, under penalty of instant dismissal, ever to mention Miss Fletcher's

name, in his or her sister's hearing, again.

Then he sent poor tired Amy to bed, and went upstairs himself, to find Margaret waiting for him, regardless of her own exhaustion, and only anxious for a chance of speaking one loving word that would be accepted, even though it elicited neither thanks nor loving look in return.

She had drawn his easy-chair close to a bright glowing fire, had placed warm slippers before it, had lighted additional candles, because David hated a dark room, and, in short, had done everything she could think of, in the way of ministering to the material comforts of the husband who had so recently turned, freezingly, from her tender efforts to minister to his distracted mind.


But poor David Fletcher was in no mood to observe, much less to appreciate, all these little wifely cares. He came in looking cold and stern, but withal so hopelessly miserable,

that Margaret had a hard struggle with herself not to indulge in some instant demonstration of her profound pity and affection.

"Why are you not in bed?" he asked, but in a tone that betrayed scanty interest in the question, as he sank wearily into the chair placed for him. "It is nearly one o'clock."

"I waited for you," said the wife gently. "I did not know whether you would let me do anything for you—read to you, talk to you, till your mind was calm enough to give you a hope of sleeping. I thought you might not care to go to bed yet."

"I shall not go to bed at all," replied David, "but I don't wish you to sit up on this account. You were tired much earlier in the evening, and I see you are more tired now. There is no reason in the world why *you* should not sleep to-night, and I should be selfish, indeed, if I deprived you of your



rest. You will oblige me, Margaret, by going to bed at once. In this trouble, believe me, I shall be infinitely better alone."

So poor Margaret, gulping down a world of tears—such tears as the cruel injustice of those we love cannot fail to draw from the pierced heart—went to bed, and allowed her husband to think that she was sleeping, while he, alternately crouching over the fire and moaning to himself, or pacing the room with slow, heavy footsteps, spent the long winter's night in a restless torture of mind that would tell upon a sensitive nature like his for many a day to come.

Once Margaret fancied that he dropped asleep in his chair for a little while, but if so, his dreams must have been of like blackness with his waking thoughts, for he groaned and started violently during this brief interval, which ended (probably when he awoke suddenly) with his exclaiming aloud, and in the same passionately re-

proachful voice that the wife remembered down stairs—

“She might have been saved! she might have been saved!”

As soon as the dull, cold morning dawned, he went out of the room (after making up the fire) and Margaret heard him immediately afterwards unbar the Hall door and go down the steps into the frosty, snow covered grounds.

At breakfast time he was looking so ill that the unhappy wife, whose influence appeared wholly lost, was at her wits end, and utterly unable to think of any plan for his relief. He had never yet asked to see Elizabeth's letter, and she was afraid to offer it now lest it should still further excite him; though there was that in it which might have pleaded a little to the father on her own behalf.

He took scarcely any breakfast, but insisted that both Margaret and Amy (who

were not much more inclined to eat than himself) should take theirs. Poor Amy, to whom a trial such as the one that had come upon them was nearly as mysterious as it was strange and new, had slept very little also, and appeared with pale cheeks and heavy eyes at the morning meal. David was very tender over her, spoke to her in the gentlest tones, frequently took her hand in his, sometimes had tears in his eyes, as he looked at her little mournful face, and in fact showed, in every possible way—unintentionally it might be—that Elizabeth's sister was, in his opinion, the only real fellow-sufferer he had in his present calamity.

And throughout all the day it was the same. After breakfast, he had a fire lighted in the recently deserted little study, betook himself there, as in that dreary time succeeding his first wife's death, and only joined the others when sent for to the regular

meals, though he had invited Amy to come to him as often as she felt inclined. When Margaret, half afraid now of the answer, asked him, timidly, if she could not do anything for him, he replied (not harshly, but in a simply courteous tone)—

“Nothing, thank you, my dear; but you had better get a drive yourself. You are still suffering from the fatigues of yesterday, and don’t look well at all. Why should you not go and spend the day with your mother? It would do you good, and Amy will take care of me.”

Margaret turned away quickly to hide the starting tears, for she was weak from want of rest, but said, when she could command her voice—

“Thank you for the suggestion, but I shall not go out to-day.”

Then, without pressing the matter, David went to his lonely cell, already haunted by the gloomiest memories of bygone days,

and, obeying the instincts of a nature that had not yet thrown off its old habit of making black things blacker, fed upon grief and lamentations till night came again, bringing scarcely more repose than the last had done.

Mr. Spenser had availed himself of the permission Margaret had given him to call during the day, and being little disposed to entertain him herself, Mrs. Fletcher had asked him to be Amy's companion in a short walk, while the sun was making an attempt to shine.

First, however, the Rector had to tell of his early visit to Abbotsmead, of Mrs. Bellew's concern for the trouble at the Hall, and her declaration that she had expected no less, that Miss Elizabeth had been ripe for mischief months ago, and that she could not think her loss would be an irreparable misfortune to Margaret. Mr. Spenser added that he had seen no opening for urging her

to come up to the Hall as yet, as she had been disposed to treat the whole matter rather lightly; but she had said, before he left, that she hoped her daughter would drive over in a day or two to spend a few hours with her. A stepmother, on such an occasion, would probably find little to do at home.

Margaret reflected afterwards on this observation, and wondered whether Mr. Spenser had given any hint at Abbotsmead of what he had himself guessed concerning her special grievance. If he had not, why should Mrs. Bellew assume that she was likely to be regarded as a stranger and an outsider in this time of general suffering? Was it natural, was it inevitable, that she should have incurred so heavy a penalty by marrying a widower, with children who had called another woman mother!

It might be natural under ordinary circumstances, but she had believed her hus-

band's love for her to be no common love ; and she knew, by every pang his estrangement was inflicting on her now, that hers for him had merited different treatment from this, had merited, at least, a recognition of her yearning wish to comfort him, though he should have owned to the absence of her power.

About the third day came the promised letter from Elizabeth, but it was curiously brief, containing only these words, addressed as before, to Margaret—


“I am married, and we are going abroad immediately. Tell my father that he must have no anxiety about me. I am as happy as a husband's devoted love can make me, happier than I ever thought to be again, on the night I left my home. Kiss Amy for me, and tell her to make up, by her affection and dutifulness to our father, what he has missed of those good gifts in me.

“Yours, still gratefully,

“ELIZABETH MEREDITH.”

Margaret gave this communication silently into her husband's hands, as he was leaving the breakfast table, to betake himself to his solitude, on the morning of its arrival. He started, changed colour, and seemed at first disposed to refuse looking at it; but the next moment he had clutched the envelope tightly, and without a word had hurried out of the room with it, to read and ponder over it alone. Soon after, Amy was sent for, and kept for nearly an hour; but Margaret heard nothing more of her letter, and had no clue to guide her as to how its contents had affected the sorrowing father.

He went on day after day as he had begun, nursing his misery, seeing nobody out of his own family, refusing to be comforted even by them. To Amy he continued invariably tender and affectionate—to Margaret he was never unkind, sometimes rousing himself to evince anxiety about her health, when the observation was forced upon him that she



looked miserably ill and worn ; but on no single occasion speaking to her of his own trouble, or claiming from her the sympathy she was breaking her poor heart at not being allowed to give.


Mr. Spenser, who saw and understood it all—his great interest in Margaret probably quickening his perceptions—was beginning to have serious apprehensions for her, if things could not be mended. Christmas had come and gone with no brightness, no festivities, no gladness of any kind in that diminished household, when one day, without any previous announcement of his intention, and acting solely upon his own judgment, the Rector went to Abbotsmead with such a report of Margaret's health and spirits that, after an hour's talking and coaxing, he prevailed on Mrs. Bellew to send for a carriage, and to go up straight, under his escort, to the Hall.

CHAPTER VI.

THE RECTOR'S HAPPY THOUGHT.

ON arriving at the Hall the Rector would not allow himself or his companion to be announced (he was in the habit of coming and going, without any ceremony, in those days) but leading Mrs. Bellew direct to the drawing-room, where he guessed the mistress of the house would be found alone, he gave the mother an opportunity of seeing her daughter before the latter could put on the face-mask, which he knew she kept always ready, even for him.

Margaret was sitting before the fire in an utterly listless attitude, doing nothing ; this



last fact being in Mrs. Bellew's estimation, an unanswerable proof that the Rector had not exaggerated the case, and that there was something seriously wrong with the object of his kind solicitude.

An exclamation of startled wonder, on discovering who it was Mr. Spenser was ushering into the room, a sudden crimsoning of the white face, and finally (as she sprang up and embraced her mother) a little gasping sob that would not be restrained, gave still further proof that Mrs. David Fletcher was not herself, and that the lady of Abbotsmead had not been lured from her home under false pretences.

"I will claim your thanks later, for having brought you the best doctor I could find," said the Rector, as Margaret was trying to steady her voice to speak to him. "Now I am going to look for Amy, and to take her with me into Ditchley, where I have some work for her to do. I shall see you both again by-and-by."

Then he was gone, and Mrs. Bellew, holding her daughter at arm's length, was contemplating her critically and anxiously; at last she said—

“I will condole with you heartily, my dear, when I know what your trouble is. As I cannot conceive it to be the loss of Miss Elizabeth—*dame* Elizabeth, I suppose I should say now—I am quite in a fog on the subject. Sit down Margaret, and tell me what's the matter.”

“We will sit down, by all means, my dear mother,” was the reply, in a tone of feigned hilarity, which was not likely to be accepted by so acute a woman as Mrs. Bellew, just after the hysterical sob that her appearance had excited, “but not to talk about me. There is nothing the matter, really, except that ours is necessarily a somewhat gloomy house just now; and as Mr. Fletcher does not care for society I get a little lazy, sitting so much alone. But it is delightful to see

you here at last. Won't you come upstairs and take your things off?"

"All in good time, Mrs. David, all in good time," said the visitor cheerily; "but I mean to get over these condolences first, that the mournful duty may not be hanging over me all day. Mr. Spenser has made me leave no end of important work at home to come up here, assuring me you were fast qualifying for a place in the cemetery beside the first Mrs. Fletcher; and I find you white and thin, and shaky and hysterical. Now, what is it? Don't let us waste time, for since I am here, I intend, whether he likes society or not, to go presently and pay my respects to your husband."

This last assertion seemed to Margaret (who was becoming very nervous and uncomfortable under her mother's cross-examination) to embody a threat; and she hastened to say—

"My dear mother, he will, of course, be

delighted to welcome you to the Hall. I will tell him you are here now if you like, and bring him to the drawing-room to have a chat with you."

"Thank you, my dear, but I am in no manner of hurry for that part of my business in your house to-day. By-the-by, what a very fine house it is, Margaret! It did not strike me nearly so much when I came up before. The world is not so blind as it often is, in esteeming Mrs. David Fletcher, number two, a very fortunate woman. Strange, that with this fact so impressed upon my mind, I should be waiting to learn what I have been brought here to condole with you about."

"Oh, pray don't go on so," said Margaret, wearily, and more than half inclined to cry in earnest now. *I am* a very fortunate woman, and I don't want condolences from anybody. The Rector means well, but he is too apt to take things into his head. He

has found me rather dull at times, because David likes to sit alone in his den, or to have only Amy with him. He feels Elizabeth's running away dreadfully, and I suppose fancies, because she and I were not good friends, that I cannot sympathize with him. I could if he would let me, and I have been a little hurt, perhaps, at his keeping me aloof. Now, this is quite all my vexation, my dear mother, for he is as kind as ever on other points; and I have not a single complaint against him. You will not, when you see him, assume that you suspect he has been grieving me, will you?"

"I don't know what I shall do yet," was the unsatisfactory reply, accompanied by another keen scrutiny of the evidently agitated and nervous wife. "I may probably tell him that I think he has married the weakest and most unreasoning woman in all Christendom—a woman who, having (contrary to the earnest advice of those who knew

life and human nature better than herself), chosen a widower, with children, for her husband, sets out with the idea that there will be no divided interest, no feeling, under any possible circumstances, on the father's part, that his new wife is incapable of sharing in his anxieties concerning these children of another woman.—My dear Margaret," suddenly assuming a less teasing, and a more earnest tone, "you know I am not over fond of David Fletcher, and never should be, if he proved himself an angel of light; but I can see that in this case he has been only obeying a natural instinct, while you have been expecting impossibilities. A man with motherless girls, who happens to have a soft heart, and mayhap a soft head into the bargain, will necessarily be inordinately fond of his children, whether this fondness is always openly shown or not. Well, they behave ill to him, and he marries a new wife, adores her too, of course—these


sort of characters are great in romantic attachments — but by-and-by one of the naughty children comes to grief, and then the paternal feelings are all re-awakened and the man, knowing that no other human being *can* know how he is affected, or suffer as he is suffering, naturally turns even from his wife's sympathy—she is a new wife, remember, and a stranger in the family, and, however disposed to be interested in the first wife's children, has, in reality, neither part nor lot in them or their concerns. These are plain truths, Margaret, though I see you are not inclined to admit them, having persuaded yourself that you have a right to be jealous of your husband's solitary grieving over his daughter's folly. In your case I should be only too thankful that he did not worry me with his lamentations, and that he was content to groan and sigh in the ear of his other daughter, instead of in mine. But you are a goose, Margaret, and always

were one, where David Fletcher was concerned. Nevertheless, as he doesn't want you just now, and you are certainly out of health, I shall propose taking you back with me to Abbotsmead for a week or so. We shall see how my gentleman will relish this?"

Margaret had listened very attentively to her mother's lecture, and had not been altogether unimpressed by it; but, at this final announcement, her face flushed deeply, and she said—

"I don't think I should like to leave home at present. David would fancy I was vexed or angry with him, and it might create a misunderstanding. Thank you, mamma dear, for the kind suggestion, but I am sure it would not do."

"Fiddlesticks!" exclaimed Mrs. Bellew lightly. "You know nothing at all about it. Leave me to do as I think best. You committed a grand mistake, as I always warned



you, in taking a widower for your husband, but now that you have got him, we must make the best of a bad job, and not suffer you to victimize yourself for the simple pleasure of being a victim. You can't imagine that I should be content to lose a whole day's work at home for nothing?"

Poor Margaret was beginning to look thoroughly harassed and weary; but she spoke with gentleness and patience still.

"As this is your first visit to me, I don't think you need grudge me the time you will give to it; but indeed, my dear mother, I cannot go from home. My husband would not like it. He might want me if I were not here; and he is in such trouble that I should be miserable away from him. I am sure when my father was living, if he had any especial sorrow or anxiety to bear, you would have considered that your place was at his side. We take our husbands 'for better, for worse;' and what

becomes of our vows if we run away the moment the worse reveals itself? As for my health, there is nothing the matter with that. If David thought I wanted change, he would go somewhere with me himself. In point of fact, we shall probably be going to London soon. The Dormers are looking out for a house for us. Don't be angry, mamma, but you see it would not be right for me to come to Abbotsmead."

"I see nothing of the sort," rejoined the mother bluntly. "If your husband took you away, what comfort would he be to you, or you to him, while his poor soft brain can admit but one idea, that idea being the wrong doing, and, probably, life-long misery, of a child he has doted on since he heard her first cry, and thought no such infant had ever been born into the world before? My dear Margaret, when you are a parent yourself you will better understand a parent's feelings, and, I hope, bring up your

daughters to have nothing to do with widowers, matrimonially. Now, as I have talked myself hoarse, we will go upstairs, if you please ; and by-and-by, while you have a rest alone—(my eyes are keen enough yet, Miss Margaret, to see that you need rest and a quiet mind)—while you have a rest alone, I shall introduce myself into that formidable den, and have a serious confab with Mr. David.”

Margaret, being really too faint and exhausted to argue any more, led the way upstairs, and offered no opposition when Mrs. Bellew, observing her increased paleness, insisted on her establishing herself upon the bedroom sofa.

After a very little more talk between the mother and daughter, the former promising, with a slightly satirical laugh, to be exceedingly cautious during her *tête-à-tête* with her son-in-law, went down boldly to confront the savage in his den.

CHAPTER VIII.

DAVID BROUGHT TO REASON BY HIS MOTHER- IN-LAW.

As David Fletcher was a perfect gentleman, we may take it for granted that, having recovered from the boundless, and, perhaps, not over pleased, astonishment which Mrs. Bellew's abrupt entrance into his sanctum occasioned him (of course she had knocked, and waited for permission to go in), he received her with all due courtesy, and gave her, in suitable language, that welcome to the Hall which Margaret had promised in his name. This beginning of the interview being understood, the remainder may be suppressed, quite enough of it transpiring

in the private meeting which followed immediately between Margaret and her husband.

The result of Mrs. Bellew's well-intentioned and, in many respects, wise homily to her daughter, had been to make the latter thoroughly dissatisfied with herself, while it had not done much to reconcile her to her husband's estrangement. The feelings imputed to him might be perfectly natural and justifiable, but, inasmuch as their existence not only grieved the heart of the loving wife, but came in the way of all her long-cherished hopes of being, in the best and highest sense, a ministering spirit, an influence for good, to the man she had married, they necessarily made her very unhappy indeed, and surrounded the future with clouds of the heaviest kind. If David was to exclude her from his confidence, to withdraw himself from her sympathy, every time his children's interests came into the foreground, how

could she promote his happiness, or fulfil the duties to which she had devoted her life? The question was a puzzling one, and not finding, by any effort of her weary brain, a satisfactory answer, this poor little woman took to doing what many another woman has done in like circumstances, or under even smaller difficulties, which she has had to confess herself unable to grapple with. She took to crying behind her two trembling hands, in a very noiseless, unobtrusive fashion, but with an idea, founded on a popular delusion, that "weeping dulls the inward pain," and that if she could shed tears enough she should be sure to feel a great deal better.

She did not mean to be shedding them when her mother returned. Mrs. Bellew had already seen far more behind the curtain than Margaret had ever intended her to do, and, for anything she could tell, the interview going on downstairs might be working

additional mischief. The very thought of what that uncompromising lady *might* be saying to her unbeloved son-in-law, made poor Margaret's blood run cold, whenever her harassed mind reverted to the subject. She had, more than once, been on the verge of rushing down to the den, and discovering the worst there was to learn; but, besides that David had never, since his trouble, invited his wife into his chosen house of mourning, she felt so physically prostrate and nervous, from the long talk with her mother, and the surprise the Rector had contrived for her, that she was doubtful whether she could get as far as the study without betraying how very weak she had become, and how little extra excitement it took to upset her.

It is true, however, of excitement as of many other undesirable things—that one dose of it is nearly sure to be followed by another.

While Margaret's tears were still dropping slowly through her clasped fingers, and bearing pathetic witness to the sorrow that was weighing heavily on her spirit, the door of her room opened noiselessly, and David himself stood hesitatingly, but with an eager, wistful look in his worn face, upon the threshold.

The next moment he was beside the sofa, (reading no discouragement in the startled, tear-blinded eyes raised inquiringly to his own) with his arms tightly and fondly encircling the wife whose love and pity he had, for so many days, put quite away from him.

He seemed unable to speak at all at first, but just contented himself with soothing and caressing the equally speechless but now passionately sobbing Margaret—for though she understood nothing as yet, except that her husband was restored to her, the reaction from her recent unhappiness to this sudden

joy took away her whole remnant of strength, and left her weak and helpless as a little child.

But when words came to the self-accusing, repentant David, there was no mistaking what they meant, nor any doubting of their heartfelt sincerity.

“My own Margaret,” he said, “my precious wife, I am here to ask your forgiveness and indulgence. I know that I shall have them, though I have been mad, blind, cruel above all, since that dreadful night when you told me, with such tenderness and pity, of the shame and the misery that had come upon us. In my anguish and vain regrets, I chose to think it had come upon me alone—that you, the dear wife who loved me, had no share, no interest in it. I even blamed you brutally, Margaret, for having, as I fancied then, sacrificed my erring child to a weak dread of giving momentary pain to me. What can I say now? I loathe myself

in the remembrance of my folly and cruelty. Your mother has spoken some hard truths to me to-day, but they only stirred up and brought to the surface convictions that have been growing for many days and nights in my tortured mind. Oh, Margaret, don't you know—have you not known throughout all, that you are infinitely dearer to me than ten daughters?—dearer a thousand times than ever, since I have learned, from your mother, what, but for my wicked cruelty, I might have learned from my wife herself. You shall have no cause to grieve over any estrangement on my part again. I shall fear to trust you out of my sight. You are ill now, dearest—I shall not rest till we are in London, and you can have the first advice. Your good mother (for she is good, though she has been calling me by every opprobrious name under the sun)—your good mother suggested carrying you off with her to Abbotsmead, acknowledging, however,

that you had refused to go ; but imagine my sparing you now, Margaret, my love, my faithful, patient, long enduring wife ! You will be happy again now, my darling ; you *must* be happy, or you will not get well. Don't go on crying, Margaret—it breaks my heart. Say something to me, dearest, just one little word, to assure me that there is no cloud, or shadow of a cloud, between us at present. I am yearning for the sound of my wife's voice. I have been yearning for it longer than she has guessed."

And Margaret, struggling with her strange and unfamiliar emotion, heartily ashamed of having yielded to it, and feeling, morally and physically, as if she had just been taken more than half drowned out of a frozen river, and was still icy cold and limp from her submersion, said gently and kindly—

"Dear David, the clouds are gone ; but we must not let them gather again if we

can prevent it. Women are weak, and they soon get chilled and exhausted when there is no sun shining over their heads."

Perhaps these words sounded cold to David Fletcher, after his own warm and impassioned ones; but there was no coldness in Margaret's heart. Only husbands who either wantonly, or unthinkingly, are continually inflicting pain upon their wives, have no idea how that pain, by its frequent recurrence, acts upon the nervous system, nor understand that while it is easy for a generous loving nature to forgive, even until seventy times seven, it is impossible to forget or ignore the moral and mental effects of the injuries forgiven.

Margaret was quick to perceive that her husband looked a little disappointed at her reception of his apologies and candid self-accusings, so, not feeling equal to anything more of an emotional nature just now, she struggled to put on a lighter manner, and

told him how her mother had been scolding and lecturing her,—stopping abruptly in the midst of her recital to ask what had become now of their rare and honoured guest.

“Oh,” said David, rejoicing in the sight of a smile, though it was but a faint one, on his Margaret’s pale lips again, “I left her in excellent company. She gave a hint, when I was hurrying up to you, after her friendly lashings, that she should like to inspect the domestic arrangements below stairs, if I thought you would not object. Of course I rang at once for Mrs. Barrington, who was proud to do the honours of kitchen and scullery to the missis’s mamma; and off they went with beaming smiles, both of them thoroughly in their element. Your mother will make quite half-an-hour’s work of it, I’ll venture to declare.”

“Then you can stay with me a bit,” said the wife, anxious to convince David that her mind was now entirely at rest, as well

as to brighten him a little if she could. "I have a world of things to consult you about, and I promised my mother to remain on this sofa till she returned. It is such a new thing for her to fuss over me, that it quite amuses me. By-the-by, David, you were of course romancing when you asserted that she had been using her tongue as a rod for you. It is impossible, you know, because she had gone straight from telling me I was the most foolish woman in the world, and that you were quite right in keeping me at arm's length in your affliction. I assure you I was never so snubbed and put down in my life."

"Which only proves," replied David, getting more and more cheerful every minute (these facile, impulsive natures have their advantages), "that your mother is a woman of rare talents and infinite resources, although she did fail in securing the right son-in-law, to her own endless regret. Oh,

I know it is so, and I don't much wonder, nor greatly care, as long as my Margaret is content with her own choice. But about Mrs. Bellew's abuse of me to-day, I give you my honour there was no mistake or romancing on my part. She pitched into me, if you will pardon the coarseness of the expression, as though I had been a condemned criminal, and hanging (in her opinion) far too mild a punishment for me. Long before she had done, I felt as if I had not a whole bone left in my unfortunate body."

"And how did you defend yourself?" asked Margaret, hoping by this question to kill two birds with one stone.

"Oh," he said, with the old shadow creeping over his face again, "I had to tell her a great deal about my unhappy girl, and the position in which she has so madly placed herself, the lion's den into which she has ignorantly run. I believe I never told

you, Margaret, that the fortune in prospective, which has no doubt been the temptation to her worthless cousin to marry her, was, by the terms of my father's will, to be forfeited if she married without my consent. Herbert Meredith cannot have known this. I never spoke of it to my late wife, feeling sure it would excite her rage against the bequeather of the money. But he will find it out all too soon, for doubtless he will try to raise funds for his shameless extravagancies upon his wife's expectations, and then the truth must be discovered. Elizabeth is aware of it herself, but she, poor soul! was in love, and believed in the professions of that villain. The money she has forfeited will all go to Amy. I could not prevent it if I would. There are trustees."

"And you think," said Margaret, "I mean you fear that Mr. Meredith may resent his wife's concealment of the real facts of the case, and treat her unkindly in consequence."

“I believe he will treat her cruelly,” exclaimed the father passionately. “He is a demon, Margaret; and you must take into consideration (when you judge me for my late forgetfulness of everything but my poor child’s insane error) that I knew this, and have been haunted day and night by the most distracting thoughts of her possible danger and certain misery.”

“But at present she is happy,” urged Margaret soothingly, “and we shall be sure to hear of her, though she set out with the intention of not writing again. Rhoda will manage to learn how they are going on, and will tell us all she hears. “For this one day, dear David,” she added pleadingly, “try not to think of poor Elizabeth. I want my mother to see us both cheerful and happy together; as cheerful and happy, at least, as under the circumstances it is possible for us to be. Mr. Spenser too will be here. You will ask him to dinner when he brings back Amy?”

"Will he need asking, Margaret?" said David, smiling a little mischievously (for he was bent upon pleasing his wife by assuming the cheerfulness she had demanded of him) "I rather think our reverend friend is as much at home at the Hall as at the Rectory. He has been up most days lately, has he not?"

"Yes," answered the wife instantly, "and both Amy and myself have been the gainers by his visits. Amy has had a good walk nearly every afternoon, and I have been taken for awhile out of my own dull thoughts. It is at your own option you know, David, not to leave me again to the charitable sympathy of my old admirer."

"I never will," said David, with such prompt earnestness and decision that Margaret felt tolerably sure it would require very little to rouse in him the old spirit of self-mistrust and morbid feeling of inferiority to all other men. "I never will, my love;

of this you may be certain. We must get to London at once, Margaret. Have you heard nothing yet from your friends about a house?"

"No; but I have no doubt they are looking out. It will be good for us all to have a change, and perhaps Rhoda will be allowed to come and stay with us. Her society would be of immense advantage to dear Amy, and you would enjoy it too, David."

"Very much, but I am content with your companionship alone, my dearest wife, and shall be so for ever now; praying night and day that you may be spared to me, and that the new sweet hope we have in common may be happily confirmed."

"I should like to live," said Margaret, in a low, earnest voice, as her husband turned once more and pressed her to his heart, "but we ought both of us to remember that no choice is given us here, and to school our hearts against another possibility."

"It would kill me," exclaimed David almost sternly, "Do not try to force that thought upon me, Margaret."

Mrs. Bellew had been charmed with the old housekeeper's courteous attentions, and was full of admiration as regarded all the order and neatness she had found downstairs. The kitchen, scullery, store-room, and other apartments appropriated to the servants of the establishment, she had likewise been greatly pleased with; but she confided privately to her daughter that the larder had tried her severely, from the unmistakable evidences it presented of lavish waste and recklessness, in the matters of bread and meat, and indeed of every variety of food.

"I thought," she said quite pathetically, "that I had given you a better training than such careless housekeeping as this implies. If you do not speedily institute a reform,

I cannot imagine how your husband's income will stand it."

"My dear mother," replied Margaret, half laughing, though she tried to look grave, "I have saved David no end of money already. But in a house like this, one cannot count the potatoes or weigh the bread. The servants all consider me a wonderfully economical manager."

"I should like to know what they would consider *me* if I were their mistress," was Mrs. Bellew's indignant and jerky observation; after which the subject dropped, as Margaret had no wish to afford her mother an excuse for any more fault-finding to-day.

The Rector was, of course, invited to dinner, and they were, upon the whole, a very tolerably cheerful party, David behaving like an angel, as regarded his mother-in-law, but only like a very human lover as regarded his wife. It is to be presumed that Mr. Spenser

was very happy in the restored confidence and affection between his esteemed friends. He said he should be quite lost when they all went off to London, and that the parish would be lost too, as he should never be able to do his work in it without Amy. Whereupon poor Amy blushed to the tips of her small white ears, and seemed dreadfully tempted (so at least Margaret guessed) to ask that she might stay at home and continue to work with him.

In parting from her mother, and thanking her warmly for this long-delayed visit, Mrs. David Fletcher expressed a hope that the ice having been once broken, the lady of Abbotsmead would come often to the Hall, but Mrs. Bellew only shook her head, and looked invincible.

"You and your husband are too old," she said, laughing, "to require the rod every day in the week, or even once a twelve-month. When you either of you *do* need

it, I will be here again. Beyond this I make no promises."

In a fortnight more David Fletcher, with his wife and daughter, were established, for an indefinite time, in a pretty little house in Park Lane, and Margaret's health was amended.

CHAPTER VIII.

A DREAMER BECOMING A WORKER.

HAD Margaret been able to lay the flattering unction to her soul that the marvellous improvement in her husband, after they had been for about two months in London, was attributable, even mainly, to her efforts or influence, she would have been a very happy woman indeed, and have felt that her life's work was progressing beyond her most sanguine expectations.

But it was not so ; and the anxious wife, in her great humility, and tendency to be readily discouraged, exaggerated in her own mind all that others had done for David,

and put the lowest possible estimate on what she had done herself.

The truth was just this. On coming to London, Margaret had been most desirous that her husband and the Dormers should be brought into close and friendly relations. She was too weak, at first, to go out at all herself, and David, hating London on its own account, would gladly have spent his whole time by his wife's sofa, reading to her, petting her, discussing perhaps the news of the day, but doing nothing more useful, or more worthy of a man's energies and powers, from morning till night.

Margaret tried, in the beginning, urging him to take Amy out. There were interesting sights of all kinds to be seen; and, in the intervals of her lessons with her masters, this poor child naturally grew dull and listless, wearying often, as her stepmother plainly saw, for her country labours, and possibly a little, too, for the society of her

country fellow-labourer. But David, though he wanted Amy to be amused, and would have grudged no amount of money in sending her to every sight in London, was not to be coaxed or driven into exhibitions, bazaars, and picture galleries himself. He declared that he loathed a crowd, that it was death to him to be jostled and elbowed by an assemblage of laughing, chattering, staring human beings, that he always felt, under such circumstances, as if he should like the ground to open and take him in; and, in short, that the whole thing was an unmitigated torture to him, and he did not recognize the necessity for submitting to it.

Then Margaret abstained from any further asking, but said that she must encourage an intimacy with the Dormers (hitherto David had pleaded for no society), that Amy's London visit might not be wholly lost to her, as a means of recreation and enjoyment. And this was the first step towards David

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Fletcher's gain, though even his wife did not foresee half the advantage that a sensible, energetic, hard-working male acquaintance, would prove to him.

Mr. Dormer was one of those men (they are happily less rare in the present day than they were formerly) who not only believe in work for its own sake, and as the only means of keeping a human being healthy and contented, but who believe that God intends every child of Adam to be a worker, and that he who thwarts the purpose of his wise and good Creator commits a sin, and renders himself liable to its penalty. With an extensive business, demanding his constant attention and watchfulness, this man yet found time to take an active part in a dozen philanthropical and charitable schemes. He seemed to be here, there, and everywhere, teaching in ragged-schools, lecturing at institutions, visiting hospitals and prisons; and, in short, doing whatsoever his hand

found to do, without greatly considering that his bodily strength must, in the end, suffer under such excessive and incessant labours. A man in the full vigour of life, who did nothing for the suffering humanity around him, was, in Mr. Dormer's opinion, an altogether incomplete, unfinished being, occupying, or deserving to occupy, the same dignified place amongst his fellow-men that an oyster occupies in the animal creation.

Hence, when he came to know David Fletcher intimately, he wondered greatly over him at first, and then, recognizing that here was a new and not uninteresting task set for him to perform, took Margaret's dreamy husband vigorously in hand, nor relaxed his efforts till he saw a spark of undoubted life and energy kindled in him.

Real earnestness on almost any subject is pretty sure to be infectious, but when it comes to be the real, unwavering, solemn earnestness of a strictly conscientious, God-

fearing man, on a subject of the highest importance to humanity (as surely those life-works are which will determine the measure of our Master's future approval), it must be a low nature indeed which will not catch something (from habitual contact with the earnest labourer) of the divine spark.

Now David Fletcher's nature, though lacking in force, was anything but a low one. He had been, from his earliest years, rather the victim of circumstances than a deliberate sinner against the manhood and the energy that were really latent in him. And when he saw, as he did wonderingly and half incredulously at first, how another man, of his own age, and with little more physical strength than he possessed, could work, with cheerful and untiring zeal, for the good of those around him, his whole spirit was stirred, and he asked himself (with an earnest desire that his conscience should give a truthful answer), whether

his infirmity, and the morbid shrinking from communion with his fellows, which it had always entailed, ought to be any actual hindrance to his becoming a worker too !

The result of this faithful dealing with himself was an honest conviction that, as his personal defects had not proved serious enough to hinder his attainment of the life-blessing he had most coveted (the love of a true, good woman), they certainly ought not to be made an excuse for the neglect of any life duty that might come in his way.

And so this poor dreamy, morbid David Fletcher began to work a little, and very timidly at first, amidst the great human hive. He had no grain of confidence in himself, and insisted that Mr. Dormer should be both his guide and taskmaster ; but he got on very well after a bit, and became warmly interested in some of the causes he took up—the education of the very poor, and the founding of Homes for destitute children,

being his special hobbies. Mr. Dormer was naturally very proud of his pupil, and often told Margaret, jestingly, that he considered David the crowning trophy of his life ; and then Margaret, while thankful beyond all words for what had been wrought, would indulge in a little secret sigh, and regret passionately that she had had no hand in the work. Sometimes Mr. Dormer would add, warningly—

“But you will have, by-and-by, to restrain your husband’s zeal, especially in the matter of giving. I don’t know what his resources are ; but, to see him sign away his cheques, one would judge him to be a Rothschild, at least. When impulsive people, like Mr. Fletcher, *do* take to philanthropy, there is often an urgent need for some judicious friend to put a curb on their lavishness.”

“Oh, let him give what he thinks right,” Margaret would answer fearlessly. “I would be a poor woman from this

moment, to be assured that David's whole coming life, with or without me, would be as happy, and as full of interest, as it is at present."

This idea, that her husband's future life might possibly be without her, was growing, almost hourly, upon Margaret, sometimes depressing her terribly, and at other times making her only very quiet, very thoughtful, and inspiring a strong wish that she could have Rhoda Meredith to talk to, and to make the confidante of many of her new feelings and anxieties. She had asked Rhoda to come and stay with them soon after their arrival in London, but Mrs. Meredith was away from home then, and her daughter could not desert the house of which she had been left in charge. A brief visit or two, during the day, had been the utmost that Rhoda could manage, and on these occasions Margaret and herself had spoken only of Elizabeth; Herbert's sister acknowledging

that she lived in hourly terror of hearing that the married cousins had, in some way or other, come to grief.

Mrs. Meredith called in Park-lane immediately on her return to town, but David refused to see her; and Margaret, who wished to be just civil for Rhoda's sake, had the full and exclusive benefit of the fashionable lady's conversation and urbanity.

She had her reasons for being remarkably urbane and gracious to David's wife at this crisis, and the latter soon discovered that she was being gently stroked and smoothed down, with the object of getting her to tell whatever she knew of old grandpapa Fletcher's will. Of course Mrs. Meredith was aware that a public copy of the document might be seen on the payment of a shilling; but she did not want the trouble of wading herself through pages and pages of law rubbish, as she called it, and she never trusted her own private business to mortal man or woman.

It was only quite recently that she had permitted herself to entertain a doubt of its being all right ; that is, all precisely as she had assured her amiable son it *must* be, and her fears now were less the result of any knowledge or inspiration that had come to her, than a constant and sickening realization—supposing she had been wrong—of what would follow upon Herbert's discovering that he had been misled. He had never written to her since his marriage, and Mrs. Meredith had no idea, apart from her too intimate acquaintance with the characters of both, how the young couple were going on. She guessed, however, that they must have spent by this time, or rather that Herbert must have spent, whatever ready money his wife had brought him ; and it did not for an instant occur to the young gentleman's mother that he would contemplate living, even for six months, upon his own and Elizabeth's income only.

Hence, Mrs. Meredith existed in hourly dread of seeing her son arrive in London for the purpose of examining old Mr. Fletcher's will, and ascertaining what amount he could raise upon his wife's fortune in expectancy.

From Margaret, however, she obtained, in spite of all her blandishments and diplomacy, no information of any kind. It was as much as the former could do to be decently courteous to a woman whom she had such abundant reason to despise and mistrust. When Mrs. Meredith ventured upon the subject of the runaway pair, Margaret assumed a look of cold displeasure, and shut her lips tightly. She would talk to her guest of the weather, of the last new book, of the flower walk opposite their windows, of anything in the world, except the one delicate matter which Herbert's mother had come to talk about. Concerning this, David's wife refused to say a word, and the disappointed and angry lady had to go away

at last, no wiser than she had been on entering the house.

Rhoda could not be spared at present, she said rather shortly, as Margaret alluded to the invitation already given, and expressed a hope that the mother having returned, the daughter would be permitted to come to Park Lane. She should see by-and-by. Perhaps after Easter it might be convenient. She was herself in such delicate health (this her listener presumed to think a pure fiction) that she could not be left quite alone. Possibly she might have a friend to stay with her when the season was more advanced, and if so, Rhoda could come for a short time.

In the meanwhile, David was growing very anxious, though he rarely spoke of his uneasiness, to hear something of Elizabeth. He had written to an old friend he had in Paris asking him to find out whether his daughter and her husband were residing

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there. The answer was that no trace of them could be discovered beyond the insignificant fact that about Christmas—it was now the end of March—a Mr. and Mrs. Meredith, a very young and handsome couple, had stopped for about a fortnight at a fashionable hotel in the Rue de Rivoli. The proprietor of this hotel had some vague idea that they had intended going, for the remainder of the winter, to the south, but whether it was to Nice, or Mentone, or Marseilles, or any other locality, he could not take upon himself to declare ; and thus the poor father was condemned to utter uncertainty even as regarded his child's whereabouts, and but for his new and interesting occupations would have found the suspense almost too hard to bear.

With the instinct of an ever watchful love, Margaret guessed how often her husband's thoughts reverted to his erring daughter, and the old longing to be able to soothe and

comfort him, if she could help him in no more definite manner, was perpetually weighing upon her mind. He was unspeakably tender over his wife at this time, never suffering any of his out of door work with Mr. Dormer to interfere with his attentions to her, never leaving her unless he was sure she would have either Amy or Mrs. Dormer with her during his absence, afraid for a breath of chill air to blow upon her, and, in short, playing the lover-husband to such perfection, that Mrs. Dormer would often tell Margaret, laughingly, that she was an utterly spoilt little wife, and express a wonder that she did not grow imperious and conceited under it.

Then Margaret would reply, with a humility that was even deeper than it seemed.

"Oh, there is no fear I hope of *that*. The more kindness I receive from my husband, the stronger is my yearning to do something in return for him. I meant, you know, to

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do so much for him—my poor David!—when I first became his wife, and what have I done? I am afraid I am even jealous of what Mr. Dormer has accomplished—not otherwise than glad and thankful that it *is* accomplished, but wishing ardently that it had been *my* work instead of your good husband's. See, what a bad heart I have! Small room, in my case, for pride or self-glorification.”

To Rhoda, when at length David's niece was allowed to come on a visit to her uncle, Margaret spoke of herself in tones of even greater humility and discouragement.

Rhoda, it will be remembered, had always been most anxious for her dreamy and somewhat indolently inclined uncle to take up a specific occupation of some sort, and when, on becoming domesticated in Park Lane, she found him in the full tide of active and useful work, her satisfaction was unbounded, and, not yet acquainted with the facts of the

case, she very naturally congratulated Margaret, in the warmest terms, upon what her influence had effected.

"My dear Rhoda," was the instant and grave reply, "it is no influence of mine that has done this, though I would have given my right hand to have had even a share in it. The truth is, I have done nothing of all I hoped to do for your uncle. I proposed a great and noble object to myself, and I have failed utterly in accomplishing it. I am very miserable when I reflect on this failure, because I did so earnestly want to succeed. I thought I had discovered my life's work, and that I must needs have strength and skill to execute it perfectly. What have I lacked? You, who meet with no failures, who help all you seek to help, raise all you seek to raise, and comfort all you seek to comfort, can perhaps enlighten my darkness. Speak truthfully, Rhoda; I am sincere, at least, in my desire for light."

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“ But I am no prophet any more than I am a preacher, dear Aunt Margaret,” said Rhoda with a smile ; “ and if you had failed, as you think you have, it would need some one far wiser than I am to explain the reason of the failure. I am sure it could not have been because you neglected the advice contained in that Bible verse to which I once ventured to direct your attention ?”

“ ‘ If any of you lack wisdom,’ ” quoted Margaret, “ ‘ let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not.’ Oh no, I cannot accuse myself of neglect on that point, Rhoda, which only makes my failure more extraordinary. I began my married life with very earnest prayers for guidance and support, under all difficulties.”

“ And continued daily and nightly to ask for divine help ?” added Rhoda, with gentle seriousness, “ as a child asks its mother hourly, if need be, for the supply of its every want. Our Father is, happily, never tired of

listening to our petitions, and the oftener we go to Him and the more we lean on Him, the tenderer and the deeper grows His love."

Margaret was silent. She wanted Rhoda to speak on. Presently the latter, in very modest tones, resumed—

"But you are quite wrong in believing that I do not often fail in what I try to do. I assure you utter failure is a very common experience with me, as my Polly could tell you now, and as Amy will certainly tell you when she begins working with me in the slums and alleys. The people whose homes I intrude into are frequently rude, bearish, and unmanageable to the last degree; but I don't get discouraged on this account. I carry my failure to the Master, and I ask Him for an extra supply of wisdom and patience for the next time. If I take a single step in my own strength, I am quite certain to stumble, so I am content to walk very

quietly and softly, and wholly in His strength whom I desire to serve. Great things I never expect or even wish to do, but just such little things as are pointed out to me day by day, and for the right doing of which I must ask for daily grace, bearing always in mind that the grace of yesterday was only sufficient for yesterday's task. This is how I understand my life's work—not mine, indeed, at all, but His "who worketh in me both to will and to do of His good pleasure."

"Ah," said Margaret, after a thoughtful pause, and with a sigh that appeared to have had its birth in some deep recess of her spirit, "I always knew that yours was a far higher and more earnest life than mine; but of this beautiful, child-like faith and simplicity I had no conception. Dear Rhoda, I am so glad to have you with us. I am sure you will be a blessing to us all."

Rhoda stayed over two months in Park

Lane (it happening to be convenient to Mrs. Meredith to give her daughter's room, for the London season, to a friend of her own, who paid handsomely for the accommodation), and was on the point of accompanying her uncle and his family to the country in the month of May, when circumstances of a totally unlooked-for nature occurred, and necessitated the abandonment of all the pleasant plans that had been formed, and the substitution of others infinitely less agreeable.

CHAPTER IX.

MISS ELIZABETH'S HUSBAND.

MR. AND MRS. HERBERT MEREDITH, after that one fortnight in Paris of which Elizabeth's father had been told, betook themselves to a small French village close to Marseilles, where, hiring a pretty little furnished house, (*chateau* it was called), they proposed staying quietly while the cold weather rendered that southern climate agreeable.

This, at least, was how Herbert put it to his wife, during those first days of idle love-making and undisturbed harmony between the two. If he had been in the palace of truth he must have said that he chose the

locality for the double reason of its cheapness and its vicinity to the most convenient of all foreign seaports ; but the time had not yet come for Mr. Herbert Meredith to display himself in his Lucifer aspect to the eyes of his adoring Elizabeth, who had implicit confidence in him in those early days, and believed, poor soul ! that her affectionate husband, in taking her to an isolated and dreary French village, where the strictest economy of living would be not only easy but inevitable, had no thought but of sharing this elegant and romantic seclusion with her.

He did remain, and without exhibiting any extraordinary degree of ennui and impatience, for the first week, and then, having seen that the miniature establishment was being conducted on a scale of the utmost frugality (for provincial servants in France are generally content with their *pot au feu* and their coarse bread, "at discretion," and Elizabeth

was nothing of an epicure), this amiable gentleman received letters which necessitated his immediate return to Paris ; and, as his wife would require scarcely any money in his absence, he took with him nearly the whole remnant of the tolerably large sum she had brought with her from home.

It was so singularly unfortunate, he said (quite enjoying the joke, in a fiendish manner, to himself), that he should have to run away from their charming little nest, just as they were both so thoroughly enjoying its delicious quiet ; and Elizabeth, with tears in her beautiful eyes, united with him in deploring the tyranny of business men, and urged him, again and again, not to stay one moment longer than he was absolutely obliged.

“As if I *should*?” he answered, with pathetic reproach (this bit of acting gave him some trouble, though, on account of its rousing his keen sense of the ludicrous).

"Why, I shall count the hours, *ma belle*, that I am absent from you."

"At any rate," said Elizabeth, "try to remember that *I* shall have no other occupation, as it is too cold to go outside and watch the nails dropping from the garden wall, like Mariana in the Moated Grange—too cold yet for even the blue fly to come and sing to me in the pane. Oh, Herbert," she added, tremulously, "I shall be *miserable* without you. In all the wide world I have, you know, *only* you now."

"Just so," assented Herbert, his thoughts rather inclined to wander at that moment. "But there are lots of old French novels amongst some of my things in that lumber-room upstairs. You can rout them out when I am gone, and they will amuse you monstrously, I assure you."

Elizabeth was a little chilled at this off-hand way of treating her genuine emotion; but she made excuses for her husband, on

the ground of his being a good deal worried just now, and she had an idea, also, that men of the world, like her darling Herbert, had a great objection to what they call "scenes," and always dread their ending, where a woman is concerned, in a fit of weak hysterics.

So Mrs. Herbert Meredith, whose faults were certainly not on the side of weakness, dried her tears valiantly, and parted from her husband with an outward show of heroism worthy of a Spartan wife. He had been somewhat vague in alluding to the probable length of his absence, but Elizabeth understood that he did not apprehend its extending beyond a fortnight at most; and during that time she managed to exist on hope and the old novels; occasionally, when she grew weary of reading, going into the kitchen, and learning from her old and always cheerful Babette the wonderful art of transforming a few bones and a quantity of herbs and

vegetables into a most delicious and wholesome soup.

Monsieur had given such strict orders about economy, Babette would say, if ever her mistress asked why she did not add a little meat to the *potage*, and really bones, if well stewed, answered quite as well. *Monsieur* was such a careful gentleman, quite unlike his countrymen in general; but then he was such a *beau garçon*, Madame had every excuse for adoring him.

Herbert did not write often. He had said to his wife, on leaving her, that he should have no spare time, and that it would be so much pleasanter when he came back, to tell her everything in detail, than just to give a few sketchy recitals in hurried letters; and this appeared to Elizabeth plausible enough, until the fortnight she had reckoned on being alone had long gone by, and she was alone still.

Then she wrote rather urgently herself

begging Herbert to explain the reason of his detention, and adding that her life was lonely beyond bearing, the house frightfully damp, and her health far from good.

In answer to this came a brief note, promising a speedy return, and advising his wife to send her address to the banker in London from whom she was in the habit of getting her dividends. A quarter's income would be due, Herbert believed, in a few days.

Elizabeth, however, finding herself without money soon after Herbert's departure, had written then to her banker, requesting him to send her the usual quarterly dividend a little in advance, which had been done; so that when, in about another week, the truant husband arrived (he had calculated on getting home within a day of the money reaching them), he found, not only that Elizabeth had been beforehand with him, but that she had actually managed (in spite of the utter seclusion in which he

had left her) to get rid of more of her money than he had intended her to spend on herself for the next three months.

In his astonishment and rage at such an unlooked for discovery, Mr. Herbert lost his presence of mind, and, for the first time since his marriage, showed the cloven foot in all its naked deformity.

Poor Elizabeth listened, in the beginning, with an almost stunned bewilderment and incredulity, to his oaths and wild blustering. Then, when he commanded her to speak, and explain what she had been about, she said, half defiantly and half chokingly—

“It was my own money, Herbert, and a daughter of old Babette’s was ill and in wretched poverty at Marseilles. I sent her a hundred francs as soon as I received my dividend, and I have promised to send some more by-and-by. Then, not being able to endure the insufferable dulness of this place all by myself, I went over one day to Mar-

scilles, with Babette, and bought some things I wanted. I have not been well, and we had nothing in the house, even to make a tisane for my cough, nor medical remedies of any kind. Of course, I made all sorts of purchases when I was in the town ; and, amongst the rest, I bought a new smoking cap, and a cigar-case, and a very pretty ring, for you, Herbert. It was the only happy day I have spent since you left me. I am sure you need not grudge it me."

But Herbert Meredith was not a man to be softened by such purely womanish appliances as these.

"Hang your gifts !" he said, brutally. "I shall put them all on the fire, if you don't keep them out of my sight. As for the money being yours, you know its a lie. No married woman has a thing she can legally call hers, except her wedding ring ; and if you play me any more such tricks as these, my lady, you won't find that small posses-

sion of yours of much use or comfort to you. Where is the remainder of the money?"

"Quite safe," replied Elizabeth, a fierce red spot burning on both her cheeks now, and her voice trembling with anger. "Do you require me to give it up to you?"

The husband looked at her steadily for a moment. Probably as he looked, the thought crossed his mind that he was evoking more of the vixen in his spirited Queen Bess than it would be convenient for him, just yet, to deal with. He may also have considered that the sum of money he was making such a fuss about, was really too insignificant to be worth the risk of setting his wife wholly against him, before he had her consent and signature in the far more important transaction he was meditating.

At any rate, Herbert abruptly calmed down, asked his wife to kiss and forgive him, assured her that it was the pressure of his old debts that drove him mad, and caused

any needless expenditure at home, just now, to seem reckless and cruel. His anxieties in Paris, he declared, had been frightful, had nearly brought on him a brain fever, and now that he had come back to be nursed and soothed, was it not natural that he should have got a little excited on hearing of his wife's extravagance? But he was very sorry for whatever he had said calculated to hurt her feelings. He would accept her kind presents gratefully, and wear them all with infinite satisfaction.


Elizabeth was by no means a fool (though her love for this worthless man had always been an amazing folly), and it took the whole evening to bring her round, and to convince her that she *had* been extravagant that day in Marseilles, and that Herbert had been only a little excited to-night. It ended, however, I regret to state, in her not only handing over to him the whole residue of the dividend, but in her adding to this the

most valuable of the jewels she had brought with her from home, that he might sell them in Paris (whither he swore he must return in ten days), and pay a few of his burdensome debts.

It was, of course, an utterly weak and foolish thing to do; but then this poor child was still fond of the bad man she had married, and as she had touchingly told him, on the occasion of his first leaving her, she had nobody now *but* him to cling to, in the wide world.

For the short time that Herbert, on this occasion, remained at the little damp villa, he was on his best behaviour, and seemed anxious to make Elizabeth forget that very ugly side of himself which he had exhibited to her, under the influence of sudden passion, on the evening of his arrival. And there can be no doubt that poor Elizabeth was sincerely and earnestly anxious to forget it too; only, being a very young wife and with

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a good deal of romance still clinging to her, she found it impossible to shake off the strange and startling impression which Herbert's rough language (even more than the anger which dictated it), had made on her mind. She had always known that he had a violent temper, and had often heard him, in the old Paris days, speak sharply to his inferiors, and even to his mother, when the latter thwarted him; but all this was quite distinct from his bad, coarse, cruel language of that dreadful night, language that had been addressed specially to *her*—the wife whom he professed to love, and who had sacrificed everything and everybody for him.

In vain Elizabeth (struggling for her share of the world's brightness), tried to make light of what had occurred, to put it altogether out of her thoughts. It would come into the foreground, notwithstanding all her efforts to keep it at bay. In the wakeful

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hours of the night, in troubled dreams, in abrupt and obtrusive visions during her daily occupations and amusements, the whole miserable scene would recur to her, and she would feel impelled, by a horrible fascination, to go over it in detail, not exaggerating (there was little need for that), but certainly not softening either look or tone that had been burnt into her heart, in these involuntary exercises of the imagination.

Herbert could not help, in spite of all his gross selfishness, discovering that his wife was greatly depressed at times, and, as the weather was warm and agreeable now, he took her out every day, either for a walk or a drive—occasionally for an excursion to Marseilles—and really exerted himself marvellously to brighten her drooping spirits. Now and then he succeeded for awhile; for, as I have said, poor Elizabeth was of an age when it is natural to struggle desperately for happiness, but the dark shadow was sure to

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return, and the husband, who hated all shadows, whether cast by himself or not, wearied for the hour when he could with any decency make an excuse for rushing off to livelier and more congenial companions. Before he managed this they had one more serious dispute, in which it must be acknowledged Elizabeth lost her temper almost as completely as her adversary lost his.

Being, during one of their *tête-à-tête* strolls in the pretty neighbourhood of their quiet village, in want of a subject to talk about (for now that these young people came to be dependent wholly on each other's society they found that they had singularly little in common) Herbert asked his wife, lightly and carelessly, some questions regarding her step-mother; observing, in his irreverent way of treating most things and most persons, that he supposed she was an 'old quiz,' who had long despaired of a husband, and without a penny to bless her-

self, or she would never have had the courage to marry a poor hunchback like David Fletcher.

"What," exclaimed Elizabeth, turning upon him with a sudden fierceness, for which he was certainly quite unprepared (she had dreamt horrible dreams the previous night), "*What* did you call my father? I would willingly believe that my ears misled me. You would not dare——"

"Oh hang it!" retorted Herbert, half laughing as yet, "you are not so squeamish as this comes to, you know. Why, I always understood you hated the old gentleman, and took your mother's part like a brick in every quarrel they ever had. What's up now, that I mayn't call him a hunchback if I please."

"Simply that *I* don't please you should," said Elizabeth under her breath, and looking dangerously white. "In the first place he is not a hunchback, and if he were a thou-

sand times over he is my father; and I would not suffer you or anybody to insult him by giving him the name. You are a brute, Herbert, and that is the solemn truth, though I have been trying all I can for the last week to forget or ignore the shameful fact. But brute or not, you have a wife to deal with who has, thank Heaven! some little spirit of her own still, and I may as well warn you, at once, that you had better not provoke me too far. I am not quite so blind, more's the sorrow and the pity! as I was two months ago; and you are not going the way to reclose the eyes your own recklessness has opened. What are you pinching my arm for?"

She snatched it from his vicinity as she asked the question, and, standing still in the road they had been walking on, gazed with flaming cheeks and wondering eyes, into the marvellously handsome face, which, possibly unknown to Herbert him-

self, had assumed its most fiendish expression.

"I did not know that I *was* pinching you," he said, with an outward calmness that could not deceive his wife; "I must have done it in pure absence of mind. But what a virago you are, Queen Bess! If you get on at this rate, there will soon be no living with you. Why, a fellow's very life would not be safe when you worked yourself into one of your passions. And all because I was unfortunate enough to hint my innocent belief that your step-mamma must have been deficient in youth, cash, and beauty."

"It was not for this that I was enraged with you," answered Elizabeth hotly; "though even this you could only have implied to annoy me, for you must have heard your own mother describe Mrs. Fletcher; and, allowing a wide margin for Mrs. Meredith's prejudice and natural spite against all women younger than herself, she must have

told you that my father's wife was a perfect lady, and exceedingly nice looking. Don't mention her disrespectfully to me again, Herbert, for I won't bear it. The truth is, I am inclined to exalt all my own people whom I have given up for ever, now that I come to contrast their virtues with *yours*."

"I am not aware," said Herbert, still with the same external calmness and the same Satanic face, "that I ever went in for virtue, my dearly beloved Elizabeth. One doesn't need it, you know, with such physical advantages as mine. Why, if it had not been for my infatuated passion for my fair and saintly cousin, I might have married a princess and been lapped in luxury all the days of my life. I am afraid you are not half sensible of your rare good fortune."

"I am so sensible of it," gasped Elizabeth, fighting with the rising hysteria, "that I wish, with all my heart, I were dead. Very likely I shall be soon, for the place you have

immured me in is frightfully unhealthy, and Babette says that a few more such coughs as I had while you were away would undoubtedly kill me."

Now, as it would not have suited Mr. Herbert Meredith's purpose at all to bury, prematurely, the unhappy girl whose life he had, in marrying her, virtually destroyed, he allowed himself to be warned by this last pathetic observation.

"Come, let us be friends, Queen Bess!" he suddenly exclaimed, repossessing himself of her arm and squeezing it very gently and lovingly. "When you talk about dying, you do for me altogether, you know. I may be a brute as you affirm, and have a blustering sort of temper; but a fellow must be made of adamant if he can hear his darling wife (vixen though she may be) allude to her death as if she thought it near at hand. As for that old crone, Babette, I shall send her flying if she indulges in any more of her

idiotic prophecies. You are worth a hundred dead women yet, my beauty, and if my mother sends me my remittance to-morrow, we will go over to Marseilles, and make a day of it. I want to give you a little treat, as well as to buy you some trifling knick knack before that dreadful expedition to Paris comes off—and, by Jingo! if I don't show myself there early next week, I shall have the bloodhounds down upon me."

He did the acting so extremely well this time, that Elizabeth was at least partially taken in by it; and as a day at Marseilles always brightened her, and Herbert out of his very own money purchased a charming little locket, into which one of his Adonis curls was ingeniously introduced by the jeweller, the domestic atmosphere cleared almost magically; and the parting between husband and wife, a few days later, was quite touching in its sadness.

"Only a fortnight, I give you my word,"

said Herbert, "if those bloodhounds don't get hold of me."

And Elizabeth, with a very vague notion of what "those bloodhounds" meant, implored him to take care of himself, and to be sure to return by the time the magnolia tree in their pretty garden was in bloom.

CHAPTER X.

LUCIFER UNMASKED.

It would be difficult to imagine a desolation more complete than that to which Herbert Meredith's young wife was condemned during the following weeks, those weeks of a bright and glowing spring, such as southern climates alone are blessed with ; when everything that breathed appeared almost dizzy with enjoyment, and the whole inanimate creation, clothed in a splendour that no art could imitate, appealed mutely to the beholder to witness how fair and glorious a lost world could still with truth proclaim itself to be.

But Elizabeth, though an ardent admirer of nature, especially of such lavish, gorgeous, redundant nature as this, had no share now in the universal brightness and rejoicing. Her heart was far too heavy for gladness of any kind to enter in. It was much worse with her at present than during Herbert's first absence. Then she believed in him fully and trustfully, and could occupy every lonely hour in thinking of his return, and in picturing the happy summer days they should enjoy together. Now, though she had condoned his past offences, and was more than willing, poor child ! to make the best of her most unhappy bargain, she could not ignore the fact that her ideal husband was no more ; as utterly gone from the face of the earth as if she had closed his dead eyes, and buried him out of sight for ever. If she lived (and at this time the neglected wife was almost indifferent about the matter) she would try to soften and improve the

tyrannical and selfish man to whom she was bound. She supposed he really liked her at the bottom of his heart, or wherefore should he have married her; but he had been dreadfully spoiled, not only by a foolish mother, but by society at large, on account of his remarkable personal attractions; and even in his wife he expected to find a slave, and a constant worshipper. Elizabeth had no objection at all to do her part of the adoring—Herbert's beauty had utterly captivated her youthful imagination in the days gone by—but then she had no notion of giving everything and receiving nothing. She was certainly not one of those sweet, soft women, who are "in their own lavish love complete," and who rather enjoy being trampled on by their masters than otherwise.

Elizabeth Meredith had no intention whatever of being trampled on by her Adonis, but she remembered that she had

chosen this destiny for herself, that the fatal knot could not be easily untied, and that, therefore, she must in self-defence make the best of it; and when he came to settle down quietly with her (having pacified those mysterious bloodhounds) her wisdom would be to control her own temper, to set him in all things a good example, and to make his life as bright and pleasant as she could.

In the meanwhile, however, Herbert's settling down appeared no nearer than it had done at first, and Elizabeth's small remainder of confidence in any promises of her husband was rapidly wasting away. In his scraps of letters, which only came at long intervals, he had always some excuse for deferring his return; and his wife, miserable and lonely as she was, had too much pride to make a complaint, or to ask him to come.

Her days were chiefly spent in wandering about the pretty, but utterly neglected garden; sometimes lying under the gorgeous

magnolia tree when its blossoms were at the richest, and trying to extract some ephemeral enjoyment out of the rare perfume with which it loaded the atmosphere. But it is a sorry state of things when a passing indulgence of the senses has to be made a substitute for heart and mind contentment; and though Elizabeth's nature was not perhaps of the highest order, it was yet high enough to suggest to her that her whole life was being miserably wasted, and to cause her to loathe both it and herself, as well as all her outwardly fair surroundings.

As the advancing spring brought tenants to the neighbouring country houses, a few charitably disposed ladies, hearing of the loneliness of the young Englishwoman in the little chateau, called upon her, and tried to tempt her from her solitude. But Elizabeth had no heart for making new acquaintances, and as she failed to return the visits; they were, necessarily, not repeated, and it

was decided that there must be something strange, and perhaps not altogether pleasant about her history.

Little cared Herbert Meredith's wife what anybody said or thought. To her the world itself appeared to be standing still, and she was fast getting into that torpid state when the revolution of the entire universe would have been as much a matter of indifference to her, as the breaking of one of Babette's kitchen platters.

She had been alone about seven weeks when one day, without any previous warning, Herbert suddenly burst in upon her, professing to be delighted to get home, telling his wife (who received him with a total absence of demonstration) that she was handsomer than ever, and assuring her that things were coming straight with him at last, that if he only played his cards well, he should, very likely, obtain in a month or so, a diplomatic situation at one of the foreign courts.

"This will just suit you, Queen Bess," he added, lightly, "for with your stateliness and beauty, you will, of course, be the chief star. I have had a tremendous work to get at the interest required; but I knew how *you* would like it, and I left no stone unturned. I shall stay with you now a week or two, and my next absence will be the final one."

"Oh," said Elizabeth, wondering listlessly whether there was a single grain of truth in her husband's statement, "that will be very nice. Possibly, if it is not a long one (this next absence I mean), you may still find a wife of flesh and blood, and not a marble statue, when you return. I don't think the humanity left in me will bear *much* more experimenting upon."

"My dear Elizabeth," Herbert was gracious enough to reply, "you don't understand a man's difficulties—women never do. But I am getting along swimmingly now. I had a wonderful stroke of luck the other day,

in a small betting transaction, which enabled me to come down here for my holiday ; and we'll go out and enjoy ourselves thoroughly. Cheer up, my princess ! You'll soon be in livelier scenes, and have an establishment worthier of your beauty and deserts than this dismal rat hole, which you know we only took *pro tem.*, and because we began our married life with more love than lucre."

Elizabeth did not admire her husband in the jaunty, airy mood he had brought with him this time ; but his very presence was a relief from her utter and sickening loneliness, and she went out with him, day after day, wherever he chose to take her, joining with him in any light conversation he originated, and even discussing (when that was his pleasure) a future she did not half believe in.

They had no positive quarrel during the whole of Herbert's stay ; but Elizabeth was sometimes strangely irritable and capricious,

and occasionally icy cold and reserved. She could not help it, poor girl! It was only the natural outgoing of those long pent up feelings, of bitterness and resentment, which her husband's conduct had excited, and which, in her solitude, had acquired proportions undreamt of even by herself.

Herbert was not blind to his wife's humours—very far from it—but this young man could exercise marvellous control over himself, when his own interests were at stake; and so he abstained from any open retaliation, and only indulged in the Satanic expression when his beloved Elizabeth was looking another way.

At length, what he called his “holiday” in speaking of it to *her*, his “purgatory” in speaking of it to *himself*, was over for the present, and once more there were hypocritical farewell words and promises, on his side, and on the wife's a simple good-bye, and a cold smile when she was charged,

above all, to keep up her spirits, and to take great care of herself.

It must be inferred that Elizabeth, when again left alone, neglected, in some way, this affectionate caution ; for, in the first letter she wrote to her husband (who was a regular and zealous correspondent now), occurred these words :—

“My cough has returned, and is worse than ever. Babette’s tisanes do me no good, so she worries my life out to see a doctor. I would, if I thought simple breath worth preserving ; but, under some circumstances, the reverse is so much the case, that I am of opinion there should be doctors to expedite our departure from this world, as well as those whose business it is to retard our flight. *Pray* don’t lose your chance of becoming an ambassador by hurrying back before your time. I am well nursed by old Babette, and if I die she will see that I am decently buried.”

In about four days from the receipt of this alarming letter, Mr. Herbert Meredith, acting as any anxious and loving husband would naturally do in a like case, presented himself, nearly breathless (in a moral point of view), at the gates of the little damp, insalubrious chateau, and entreated Babette, who had admitted him with a growl, to tell him whether his poor wife still lived.

Babette replied that she did, but that her cough was terrific, and her spirits worse even than her cough. *Monsieur* had better be very careful in announcing himself, as excitement, in such illnesses was often fatal.

Elizabeth, however, was up, and not looking, Herbert at once decided, much worse than usual. He did not hear her cough for the first half-hour after his arrival, and he held the private opinion that she had grossly exaggerated the whole affair.

This impression, was, of course, not calculated to improve his temper. People who

think nothing of deceiving others, have, usually, a very singular aversion to being deceived themselves; but he only said he was glad to find his wife less ill than he had expected, and assured her that he had only anticipated his return by a few days.

"And the diplomatic appointment?" questioned Elizabeth, with an indolently sarcastic smile. "Is it all settled? Shall we leave this dismal rat hole (your own name for *my* residence of the last five months) immediately? Ill as I am, I am not too ill to begin packing to-day, if you tell me I may do so."

Herbert bit his lips fiercely, and looked very like a tiger who is only deferring his spring till the right moment comes. But he spoke mildly, when he could sufficiently command his voice to speak at all, and Elizabeth was a little ashamed of her own evil temper.

"The truth is," he said, "the appointment in question depends wholly now on my being

able to raise a large sum of money, part of which I must give to the gentleman who has been exerting his influence for me, while the other part we should require for our rigging out, journey, and so on. My dearest Elizabeth,"—sitting down beside her sofa, and passing one of his arms over the back of it—"you will have to help me here, for your own sake, my love, even more than for mine. I promised my mother, when I ran off with you, that I would not broach the subject I am now coming to, for some few months after our marriage, and I have kept this promise faithfully till the present hour. The thing is just this. We want a good round sum of money, and we have no means of getting it except by raising upon the fortune you are to inherit from your grandfather. There will be no difficulty in the world in doing this, if you give me your authority and signature; for, I believe, the money was settled on yourself, so that, without your consent,

no husband could touch it. We shall want two thousand, at least.

Hitherto Elizabeth had maintained the recumbent posture on her sofa in which her husband had found her. She was very weak from her cough, and rarely sat up much during the day; but as the meaning of Herbert's long preamble dawned on her mind—when, in short, his specification of the sum he required made the whole matter clear to her—she sprang, as if by a shock of galvanism, into a sitting attitude, grasped his arm, and said, in a voice from which all sarcasm, all taunting, all coldness, were wholly expelled,

“Herbert, what *can* you be thinking about? Are you saying this in jest? You know, you *must* know I have no fortune in expectancy, that I sacrificed all but my five hundred a year in marrying you.”

Here she stopped, for her husband's face, in which wild incredulity and fiendish rage

seemed battling for the pre-eminence, was something terrible and alarming to see. He literally could not speak for a full minute. It seemed as if the violence of his passion was suffocating him, and Elizabeth (who was but a woman, after all, and, as such, impotent against a man's wrath let loose) quailed, in her secret heart, at this man's aspect, and wondered, with a perfectly serious though frightened wonder, if he meant to kill her. She trembled too much to say another word while he was silent; but she pressed, very gently and timidly, the arm he had apparently forgotten to draw from her, and looked at him beseechingly and meekly.

It would have been all the same if she had looked at him with the eyes of a murderess. He cared nothing about her looks, nothing about her fears; his mind was possessed but with one thought, and that thought was turning an already exceptionally bad man into a devil. At last he spoke—

"If this is true, Elizabeth, your getting me to marry you will be about the worst day's work you ever did in your life; but I don't believe it; the thing is too monstrous, too improbable. With all your vixenish temper and brazen spirit, you would not have *dared* to deceive me."

He had got the full tide of his anger and malice in a leash as yet, and Elizabeth's first terror was sufficiently calmed to allow the brazen spirit to which her husband alluded to flare up for a moment, at his insulting words.

"It *is* true, Herbert," she cried, in a voice quivering with passion, "as true as that you are a mean coward to speak to your wife in this way. I did not deceive you. I thought everybody in the family knew the terms of my grandfather's will, knew that I should not have another penny if I married without my father's consent. And what, pray, do you mean by saying that I *got* you to marry

me? Do you call yourself a *man*, and flaunt your manliness in a style like this? I think, if I tried, I could find you a more suitable name, either in French or English."

It is doubtful whether Herbert Meredith heard, or took in, if he heard, the half of his wife's indignant words. The first three of them had been more than enough to seal his despair, and to intensify his bitterness and deadly wrath against her. When she paused from exhaustion, and the wild beating of her heart, he only said under his breath, and with his face of a grey whiteness—

"Have a care in your raving for your own sake. When a man has lost his last hope, through a woman's base concealment, he becomes dangerous."

"Again? you are brute enough to *repeat* that wicked falsehood!" gasped Elizabeth, struggling now with a paroxysm of hard coughing. "Why *should* I have concealed the truth from you? Was I to assume that

you were seeking me for my money? Did you not swear that you loved me, and that you should go utterly to the bad if I refused to marry you!"

A sneer of such utter, withering scorn, distorted Herbert's handsome face at this reminder of his too successful acting in the wooing days, that Elizabeth was constrained to look at him, as she would have looked at a striking and curious picture.

"And you believed me!" he said, with something that would have been a laugh if his spirit had not been too heavy with his own despair for such a recreation. "A credulity and an innocence like this merit the reward I am at length in a position to bestow, and that I have a very singular satisfaction in bestowing. Learn then, my amiable cousin, and profit by the lesson, that I never even admired you, and as for love, I give you my solemn word and oath, that there is no grisette in Paris (however small her attrac-

tions) that I would not have preferred, infinitely and immeasurably, as a wife, to yourself. I was a desperate man when we met, wanting money badly enough to tempt me into swallowing any bitter pill that had a substantial gilding. My mother, who was in the same fool's error as myself about your expectations, urged me on ; and so, with a sickening repugnance to the dose I was taking (this is Bible truth, Elizabeth), I took *you*, and found you not one jot more palatable than I had expected. In the course of our five months of union, you have by turns treated me to insolence, to violence, to sarcasm, and to freezing coldness ; and I have borne all, with a saint's patience, till now. I had my end to gain, and it rather amused me to see how a woman, with a fair share of woman's wit, could be taken in through her idiotic vanity. The revelation of this morning has somewhat tried my patience, and introduced an opposing element into my

saintliness, but you alone are answerable for this; *my* conscience is quite easy about the matter. You are looking a little excited and uncomfortable, I perceive, but if you'll take my advice, you will refrain from talking. That cough of yours has a rather nasty sound about it. By-the-by, what money, in a small way, have we in the house at present?"

Elizabeth was deadly white, and except for the unquiet heaving of her chest, she might have been gazing recently on a Medusa's head, for any life or animation that appeared to be remaining in her. Herbert's question, however (probably from its practical, everyday nature), struck upon some chord of her stunned brain, that was yet able to answer to a human touch. In a dull, mechanical voice, she said, her large unnaturally dilated eyes still fixed wonderingly on her husband.

"The quarterly dividend came yesterday.

It is in my desk, and the key is here, on my watch chain. Do you want it?"

"Never mind now," he answered, as, with her poor weak thin fingers, she began the labour of detaching the key. "I know where the desk is kept, and that will suffice. Perhaps I had better leave you now to your repose, for, to speak frankly, I don't feel it quite safe to stay where I can see you. Many a man has murdered his wife with less provocation than you have given me, and not hating her half as much as I do, from the very depths of my heart and soul, hate you, and as I am goaded (I suppose by the fiends that have got into me, through your too late confession) into impressing on your mind, as a soothing anodyne, to go to sleep upon."

How much of all this Elizabeth was able, in the half bewildered state of her faculties, to understand clearly, must be a matter of doubt. Some portion of it (probably the cruellest), she unquestionably did take in,

for as Herbert's savage, almost hissing voice died away, and he was himself turning from her, she sprang suddenly to her feet, put up one arm in what appeared a menacing, but might only have been a deprecating, gesture, and then more abruptly dropped it at her side, as a violent fit of coughing seized and convulsed her, ending in the rush of a stream of red blood from her mouth, a low cry, and a heavy fall back upon the couch, from which she had only just arisen.

It would be too revolting to dwell upon the Satanic smile that curled Herbert Meredith's wicked lip, as he stood, for a moment, gazing upon his crushed adversary, the wife whose brazen spirit had proved no firmer than a reed as opposed to his man's pitiless strength and tyranny. But he lacked the courage to put his own neck in jeopardy by becoming quite a murderer. She would die, of course, he argued complacently ; but he

had better have the merit of doing what he could to save her.

So, ringing the bell violently, he summoned Babette, and swearing roundly at her for the noisy emotion she betrayed on seeing her poor mistress's condition, sent her off for a doctor, and remained with his wife, trying to pour a little wine down her throat, until that gentleman arrived.

Then they carried poor Elizabeth, still in a dead faint, to her room up-stairs, and the village Esculapius, assisted by the zealous and kind-hearted old Frenchwoman, did everything usual in such cases to restore consciousness, and to prevent a repetition of the hemorrhage.

Herbert, pleading an excess of grief and anxiety which would unnerve him if he lingered in the sick room, left doctor and nurse to do their work alone, retiring to a distant apartment, where he wrote a hurried and excited letter to his mother.

In less than an hour, and before he knew whether it was to be life or death for his unhappy victim, he was on his way to Marseilles, with every penny he could find in the house (Elizabeth's desk he had coolly broken open), and that same night he took his passage, and sailed in a vessel bound for Alexandria.

He had hoped, till within the last eight hours, to visit this city alone, as he was doing now—a little later, perhaps, in the season; but with two thousand pounds, instead of one hundred and twenty, in his pocket.

CHAPTER XI.

MARGARET HAS HER OWN WAY.

RHODA MEREDITH had stepped out on the balcony in Park Lane, one morning just after breakfast, and while some of the party were still at table. They were all going down the next day to the country, and Rhoda said she must have a last look at the lovely flower-walk, and the bright green park beyond, these being objects of her very especial admiration, and not likely to greet her sight again while in their present freshness and purity of early spring clothing.

"Do come out, Amy," she called, after a minute or so of silent enjoyment. "It is

such an exquisite morning, and the birds are having a grand concert in those trees opposite; and the park is full of people; and, oh, how splendid it will be in the country if this weather lasts! But" (in a suddenly changed voice), "here is a cab stopping at our door, and, I declare, with mamma in it. Surely she has not come to hinder my going to Ditchley, after all."

"Nonsense," responded Amy, joining her cousin, and watching the quick descent of Mrs. Meredith from her vehicle. "As if we should consent to your being hindered now! But it *is* strangely early for a visit from your mother. Do you think" (in a whisper) "she has had any news from abroad?"

"Not impossible," said Rhoda, in the same cautious tone; "but Uncle David will not see her; so that if there is anything to be told, we shall all hear it first. Is he in the breakfast-room still?"

Amy turned to the window and looked.

"Yes ; they are both at the table, reading their letters. Of course, our man will show Mrs. Meredith into the drawing-room. We had better go in and warn Mrs. Fletcher. I am sure she did not catch what you said just now."

To the dismay of the two girls, who both knew how the master of the house would be annoyed, the breakfast-room door was almost burst open as they themselves re-entered through the window, and Mrs. Meredith, having declined the ceremony of a formal announcement, dashed in, looking red and excited, and holding in her hand a letter on foreign paper, which she appeared to have been crumpling and crushing unmercifully.

"Don't go, David Fletcher," she exclaimed, as that gentleman, with a suddenly flushed face, was rising hastily to leave the room. "This is no visit of either ceremony or friendliness. It is one of urgent necessity, and you *must* hear what I have come to tell.

Give me only breathing time to tell it in, and sit down again for pity's sake! I have no concealed weapons about me, and though I *am* your dead wife's sister, I cannot injure you by breathing for ten minutes the same air that you breathe."

David sat down, as white now as he had been crimson before; and Margaret, with a foreboding of trouble at hand, took her own chair, and seated herself close beside him.

Then Mrs. Meredith, impatiently shaking her head when her hostess asked politely if she would not have a cup of tea or coffee, gave a great gulp, cleared her throat, and went on—

"Here is a letter I have just had from my son Herbert. It is dated five days ago. He writes in great excitement, to tell me that Elizabeth is ill, has broken a blood vessel, and is, he fears, in some danger, though not of an immediate kind. He asks me to let her own family know of it, that they may go

to her if they please. So I came off at once, and I will give you the address if anybody has a pencil, or there is pen and ink at hand."

She had spoken very fast, and under manifest agitation. David, who had watched her narrowly, and whose heart was sinking with terror, felt convinced that she was hiding more than she revealed; and, in a stern, cold voice, he called upon his sister-in-law to finish her story, and let them know the worst.

"Oh, dear," she said, with a mingling of irritation and serious distress, "all this is cruelly hard upon me, and will have a frightful effect upon my nervous system; and I am sure, David Fletcher, it ill becomes you, as a man, to endeavour to intimidate a poor weak woman, whose only son is no less concerned in the trouble that has overtaken us all than your daughter. What am I to tell you further? Elizabeth

was alive when Herbert wrote. I suppose you thought she was dead."

"Go on with your story," almost thundered David now. "I have little doubt, if you speak the whole truth, it will be black enough, without the addition of death to its other horrors. Is your son taking care of his dying wife at present?"

Mrs. Meredith was furiously indignant at being thus spoken to, and, tearing her handkerchief from her pocket, she applied it to her tearless, though very wrathful, eyes.

"You are a heartless man, David Fletcher," she whined, "and it is little wonder that my poor sister found an early grave. Your question shall be answered, however," she added, with an abrupt transition from the pathetic to the spirited—the early grave conjured up by her own imagination of the defunct Mrs. David, having possibly suggested the leap. "My son Herbert is not with his wife. He endured her tempers to

the last possible moment; and now, quite aware that if he remained near her she would quarrel with him even on her death-bed, he has gone with his broken heart to Egypt, or some remote country; and goodness only knows if I shall ever look on my darling boy's face again. Elizabeth is well attended to in her own home by an old French servant, and by the best physician my poor Herbert could secure for her. Now you have got everything out of me there is to tell, and I don't want to stay to hear your comments. You can join your daughter at once, as you have her address; and *my* belief is that she will get over this attack. Anyhow she has only herself to blame, as she caught cold from imprudence, and broke the blood-vessel in a rage. My poor boy has done all *he* could in the matter."

And before David could sufficiently master the limitless disgust and indignation, which every word uttered by Herbert Mere-

dith's mother had excited, that injured lady (without the idle ceremony of a farewell to any of the party, her own daughter being one member of it) rose from her seat, gathered her silken skirts about her, and swept majestically out of the room.

In her agitation she was careless enough to drop the crumpled letter she had all along held tightly in her hand, at the front-door. The servant who picked it up carried it at once to his mistress; and Margaret, who had mistrusted the entire story as told by Mrs. Meredith, and who considered the very urgent nature of the case an ample justification for doing what, under ordinary circumstances, would have been a dishonorable thing, opened Mr. Herbert Meredith's epistle to his mother—it was the one written from the little villa on that fatal morning—and read these choice words—

“MY DEAR MOTHER,

“I write hurriedly, and in a fever of mind that is next door to madness. You committed a supreme error in urging me to take E. F. for a wife; the infatuated girl has told me only an hour ago that she forfeited wilfully in marrying me, without old David’s sanction, every sixpence that her grandfather left her on such mean and shameful conditions. Can you wonder that I am nearly mad? I had planned everything so delightfully. I meant to raise two thousand and be off to the world’s end, for a few years at least, to enjoy myself, and shake off the remembrance of my five months of slavery and hypocrisy and weariness, past describing. Not that I favoured my lady with much of my company; but the very thought that I was tied to her (you know I always hated the girl, even as a cousin) was enough to drive me wild, and whenever we were together she managed to

exasperate me by her tempers to such an extent, that it is a miracle I did not kill her. She has in all probability done that work for me herself now, by breaking a blood-vessel suddenly, after a hard fit of coughing, and in the midst of a little scene we were having, àpropos of her having deceived me about the money. You had better let her people know that she is lying here in a dangerous state, and with only an ancient crone, who has acted as our servant of all work, to look after her. For, by jingo ! I can't stand it any longer, and I mean to take the liberty of borrowing whatever cash I can find in the house, and being off with it to Alexandria (which I hear is a nice place for poor beggars) to-night. I will let you know where to send my next remittance as soon as I arrive. Of course, I must try to live by my wits again, till E. goes off the hooks ; when I flatter myself I shall contrive on my own account a better matri-

monial bargain than you, in your haste to get rid of a loving son, contrived for me. Don't fail to apprise me *of the course of events*. A word to the wise—

“Your affectionate, but desperate son,

“H. M.”

Margaret's very heart had grown' sick during the reading of this brutal letter, but after a very little consideration she decided on showing it to her husband, in the first place that he might be thoroughly satisfied that Elizabeth had been alive when it was written, and in the next place that it might help in securing his acquiescence in a plan she had thought of, and hoped to carry out.

David had met this great trouble with extraordinary outward quietness. When Mrs. Meredith left the house he had told them all that he should like to be a little while alone, that in an hour, at most, he would ask his wife to join him, and they would then discuss together what was best

to be done. It was while waiting for the promised summons that Margaret had obtained possession of the letter ; and she carried it, open in her hand, when her husband, before the expiration of the hour, sent for her to come to him.

He took the crumpled document silently from her, shuddering slightly as he began to read—but when he had reached the end, and Margaret was expecting some violent expression of his feelings, some anathemas hurled at the head of his utterly reprobate son-in-law, he only spurned the base letter with his foot (having first thrown it on the ground), and said, almost calmly—

“ You see, my love, I knew beforehand the character of the man my poor Elizabeth linked her fate with. I have lived in expectation of something like this for the last five months. It has not taken me by surprise, as her elopement with him did. Margaret, it breaks my heart,” he added, drawing

his wife to him and kissing her tenderly, "to have to leave you in your present state of health; but I *must* start for Luchon (is not that the name of their village?) to-day or to-night at latest. You will return with the girls to Ditchley to-morrow, and you will for my sake, take every care of yourself, and write to me daily. Your mother will be close at hand, so that——"

"So that," interrupted Margaret, laying her fingers upon David's mouth, and speaking as if she meant her words to stand; "she can receive the girls, as visitors, for a short time, if you do not care for their going to the Hall alone. As for me, David, I go with you. I had determined on this, before I joined you. What could you do with that poor child without a woman's help? Besides, I shall love to be with you. The misery of my life, David, its special grievance, at least, is that I do nothing for you involving the smallest sacrifice. My dear, dear husband," she added, still preventing him from speak-

ing ; " I know all the arguments you are intending to use, but there is not one of them that I shall consider worth a straw. My health is perfect. I have never been abroad, and have always been dying to go. The journey will do me a world of good ; I may be a little comfort to poor Elizabeth, and of course I shall be an enormous comfort to you. If she gets better (and indeed I think she will), we need not remain long away. We will bring her home with us, and we should be at Ditchley long before there can be any need for *my* health to be especially considered. Now you may speak if you wish, for I have settled everything, and I am going to instruct Amy to write to my mother, while I see to the packing of your things and my own."

David's judgment was not in the least convinced by all his wife had been saying so glibly ; but his heart was touched, and his inclinations were wholly in favour of the plan she proposed.

After a few weak efforts to show her the peril she would be encountering, in rapid travelling, in possible excitement and distress on arriving at Luchon, in the nursing which he was sure she would insist on undertaking, supposing they were not too late, David gave up the contest, and then made Margaret very happy by acknowledging that her presence and sympathy would be a very Heaven-sent boon to him, whatever he should have to go through.

So all was done as Margaret had first determined. Mrs. Bellew's willingness to receive the two young ladies was assumed by her daughter, as a matter of course, under the very urgent circumstances. The letter to Abbotsmead was written ; the packing accomplished ; the farewells to niece and daughter said ; and at nine o'clock the husband and wife, attended by the latter's own maid, started on the first stage of their long and fatiguing journey.

CHAPTER XII.

STEP-MOTHER AND STEP-DAUGHTER.

MARGARET had been watching for four days and nights, with scarcely any intervals of rest, beside Elizabeth Meredith's sick bed. The latter was still in imminent danger when her father and his wife arrived, and poor old Babette, who had been her only nurse, was quite worn out, not only from actual fatigue, but from the anxiety which the strange responsibility of her position inevitably entailed upon her. Herbert had gone off without giving the woman in whose sole charge he was leaving his probably dying wife, any instructions beyond those comprised in a

negligently uttered hope that she would manage to "get on," till her mistress's friends from England came to the rescue. He was "desolated" that he could not stay himself, but business of the last importance obliged him to leave that very night, and it was impossible to say when he would be back. He was sure Babette would be faithful, and do her duty, and in proof of his great confidence in her, he entrusted her with sixty francs (loose money he had found in his wife's desk), to pay all the house bills, to purchase medicines and invalid luxuries, if required, and, in short, to meet every possible expense that could be incurred between now and the time when Elizabeth's people could reach Luchon.

To the doctor, this courteous and liberal-minded gentleman did not vouchsafe an explanation of any kind; indeed he only saw him for a minute after his first visit, and the former could scarcely credit Babette's state-

ment when she told him the next morning, on his arriving very early to see his patient, that *Monsieur* was actually gone. They both came, without much difficulty, to the conclusion that this husband (if he was a husband at all, which the doctor, at least, thought doubtful) was a precious bad one, and they had a warm compassion for the poor, pretty young lady, whom he always, as Babette could testify, shamefully neglected, and had now basely deserted in her extremity.

Nevertheless, as there were only sixty francs to the fore, and the last month's house rent (with some other bills, besides Babette's wages for nearly six weeks), were not yet paid, neither the doctor—kind-hearted man though he was—nor the old woman could see the way to engaging extra attendance, or doing anything for which ready money would be needed, until the English friends arrived. What they could

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of themselves, they did willingly and ungrudgingly. The doctor came every day to the little villa, sent medicines from his own surgery, and gave to the case, in which he grew interested, a very diligent and conscientious attention ; and Babette, foregoing her natural rest, and leaving all her downstairs work to its fate, devoted herself wholly to the task of nursing, instituting a cooking apparatus, of a temporary and original kind, in the sick room, and letting her own frugal *pot au feu* simmer all day beside poor Elizabeth's jellies and tisanes.

It was altogether a strange and somewhat touching order of things, that the travellers found prevailing at the little damp villa on their arrival. The lower part of the house had not been opened for nearly a fortnight, and what with the close, musty smell, both from the want of fresh air and a quantity of dead flowers in the vases, the layers of dust on all the furniture, and the really dilapi-

dated condition of the furniture itself (for Herbert had taken the cheapest place he could hear of), the aspect of desolation spread over everything was funereal in the extreme, and David, realizing that this had been his poor child's home for the last five months, was so affected, on first entering those dismal rooms, that he could only express by a groan his strong feelings of disgust and loathing.

What a good thing it was, as Margaret reminded him later, that he had brought some sensible, capable women with him. Had he come alone he would, probably, have sat day after day, whenever excluded from the sick chamber, in the midst of that chaotic desolation, and have had the natural gloom of his mind, and every apprehension inseparable from his actual circumstances, intensified a hundredfold, by the horror of his surroundings.

As it was, an hours or two's cheerful

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labour, on the part of Margaret's neat-handed English maid, created quite a magical transformation in the down-stairs department, and with open windows, clean tables and [chairs, well-swept floors and carpets, and fresh flowers from the luxuriant garden, the rooms looked nice and pretty enough, though even now there was a sufficient hint of dampness about the premises generally, and sufficient tokens, on all sides, of the place having been neglected for years, to have justified Herbert in describing it as a rat hole, and to excite David's utmost wrath as often as his mind had leisure to revert to the subject.

The next thing Margaret did, after setting her maid to clean and tidy the miserable-looking rooms, was to send the good old Babette to bed for a whole day. Both David and his wife thoroughly appreciated the devotedness of the simple Frenchwoman, and were unanimous in deciding that, whether

her present mistress lived or not, she should be well rewarded and taken care of.

Finally, Margaret installed herself as head nurse in the sick-room, banished the cooking stove (henceforth her own servant could help in the kitchen), admitted all the air that could in any way be got at, and reduced things generally to a satisfactory state of order and cleanliness. There was a little couch downstairs that would serve nicely as a temporary bed, and this she had brought up for herself, so that there would be no necessity, she said, for her leaving her charge at night, while vigilant and incessant watchfulness was still the one thing required. To all David's warnings and expostulations, to his entreaties that she would let him hire a trained nurse at once, and be content with superintending her duties, Margaret turned an absolutely deaf ear. She was bent on doing something to prove to her husband that, even where his children were concerned

(his children to whom she was not the mother), she could sympathize with him heartily and lovingly. And then, too, she had the plea that Elizabeth herself, though forbidden yet to speak a single word, had smiled very faintly and gratefully on first seeing her stepmother beside her bed ; while, ever since, she had appeared less painfully restless and uneasy when Margaret was in her sight.

These were all-sufficient reasons for justifying the latter's obstinacy—so, at least, she thought herself—and David, seeing her cheerful and well every morning, and believing that in her hands Elizabeth *must* recover, gave up contending, and only thanked and blessed her in the most enthusiastic terms whenever she gave him a chance, which was not often, of speaking to her.

For, as it was discovered that the patient could not see her father without emotion, and an apparently strong desire to say some-

thing to him, the doctor entreated Mr. Fletcher to keep away from the sick-room entirely, which David, of course, was obliged to do, spending his days, miserably enough, in vain endeavours to occupy himself at home, or in taking short and dismal strolls in the immediate neighbourhood of the little villa. But there was always one hour, in the cool of those delicious southern evenings, when Margaret, resigning her post either to Babette or her own maid, would come down and walk or sit with her husband in the pretty wilderness garden. To both of them this hour was a pleasant and refreshing time, and the air of novelty and romance that surrounded everything, to Margaret's imagination, greatly enhanced the charm, and caused her in after years to remember, with a very special interest, those first quiet, uneventful days spent in that isolated French village.

The later days had an interest all their

own, and one to which, alas ! clung no associations of pleasure or enjoyment.

“ I congratulate you, Madame,” exclaimed Elizabeth’s zealous doctor, addressing Margaret, on the fifth day of her attendance on the invalid. “ My charming patient is decidedly better ; the pulse and the skin both indicate it. She will recover from this most severe and dangerous attack. She must drink a little wine, and I even permit of her speaking ten words to-day. To-morrow it may be twenty. She will thank you, in those ten words, for having, with the aid of the blessed Virgin, saved her life. The good father shall, if all goes well, have the twenty words to-morrow. I do not allow him to approach his amiable daughter till then.”

Poor David was too happy and too grateful for the joyful news the doctor carried down to him, to rebel in the least against this authoritative decree. He employed him-

self, that day, in writing a long, jubilant letter to Amy, in gathering and arranging in vases, for the salon, nearly half the flowers in the garden, in honour of Elizabeth's amendment, and in waiting (as patiently as he could) for the evening hour and Margaret.

She was looking, he thought, more tired than usual, when she joined him ; but her face was bright and cheerful, and she assured him that all, both with her invalid and herself, was well. In reply to David's inquiries as to how Elizabeth had seemed impressed on hearing the doctor's opinion of her condition, Margaret said she was still in some doubt on this point. She was inclined to believe that Elizabeth's own feelings were divided. The ten words she had received the doctor's sanction to speak had been these—

“ If I am not to die, what can I do with my lost life ? ”

After this, and when Margaret had an-

swered, soothingly, that there was time enough to think of that, she had sighed heavily, and closed her eyes, as if she would gladly shut out all prospect of the world to which she was to be sent back.

“And yet,” added her watchful and keen-sighted nurse, “I cannot help thinking that the poor child had been terrified and awe-stricken while the shadow of death was upon her. There is certainly relief of some kind plainly visible in her wasted face, though I suppose when the remembrance of that brutal husband comes, she loathes the very life to which, through fear of death, she clings. We shall judge better of her real feelings in a day or two.”

David saw his daughter the next morning, and held her, for a moment, in his arms while she sobbed out some broken words of gratitude for his kindness in coming to her, and for bringing “that good and tender friend” (pointing to Margaret), who had

saved her life, and been more than a ministering angel to her.

"But she must rest now," said Elizabeth, trying to give emphasis to her very feeble voice. "She is overdone already, and will be laid up, too, if she goes on nursing. Babette will manage me again perfectly; and, in a few days, I shall be down-stairs—oh what a trouble I have been to everybody!"

These last words were spoken with a touching plaintiveness, and with burning tears rushing to the eyes of the speaker, who was ordered to say nothing more for the remainder of the day, but to keep quiet, and to sleep as much as possible.

Margaret consented, at David's earnest entreaty, to take a whole day's rest on the morrow, to have a long drive with him in the morning, and to sit under the magnolia tree, doing nothing, all the evening. But she did not enjoy her recreation; she had the feeling that she was deserting her post,

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that she was selfishly neglecting a duty that had been manifestly put in her way; and that Elizabeth would be sure to get on badly without her.

In point of fact, Elizabeth did miss her very gentle and skilful nurse cruelly, and she had been irritable with Babette on several occasions, and had made so little progress as regards strength that her doctor was seriously displeased, and told her bluntly that, if she worked against him, he would throw up the case even now, and have nothing more to do with her.

Of course this ended in Margaret's resuming her post; and as, with increasing strength, Elizabeth became very difficult to manage and control, as her moods were sometimes capricious and irritable, sometimes bitterly self-accusing and repentant, but far oftener intensely brooding and melancholy, her step-mother found her labour of love one of severely tried patience also.

She bore up, however, bravely and uncomplainingly, as long as nature enabled her to do so ; and when, one evening after a day of intense heat (it was the first day of Elizabeth's leaving her room), Margaret suddenly fainted, nobody guessed, till the doctor came, that any special catastrophe was at hand, or that before morning two other human lives, —the lives of a mother and a child—would be trembling in the balance.

CHAPTER XIII.

BABY.

It would be as idle to attempt any description of David's state of mind, of his remorse, of his anguish, of his ungovernable excitement generally, while a shadow of danger attached to the condition of his wife (fortunately this was only the case for about a couple of days), as it would be to tell, in words, of Margaret's rapture when she first opened her eyes, with intelligent consciousness in them, to the sight of a living child. A little girl it was, white and drooping as a snow-drop, no larger than a good sized doll, no features (except eyes) to speak of, but

possessing, in its mother's estimation, more attractions than had ever been owned before by any baby under the sun.

There *was* something, no doubt, in the extreme diminutiveness of the wee creature, in its evident fragility, in a perplexed, wistful look it had in its big blue eyes, as if asking why its entrance into such a sorrowful world had been precipitated, that gave it an unusual and rather singular interest. David was quite afraid to touch his infant daughter, and when Margaret insisted, laughingly, on his taking it in his arms, he said he dared not, for fear of doing it some mortal injury; but that he would admire and adore it, at a safe distance, for as long as she liked. She liked very well to have him join with her in doing homage to the tiny white heap, nestling so closely at her side; but whether her husband was with her or not, Margaret's joy and delight and pride in her baby, her first born, were in excess of


all pleasurable emotions she had ever known till now, and filled her whole soul with a wonder no less amazing than her gratitude.

No woman, I suppose, can have any just idea, before she becomes a parent, to what extent the purely maternal instinct is capable of development in her nature. Certainly Margaret had never dreamt that a baby could be to her what this atom of humanity was, from the moment her enraptured eyes had first beheld it; and as, day by day, it twined its ridiculously small self closer and closer round her heart, she sometimes trembled in the thought that she might come, not only to make an idol of it, but to rank its claim above the claims of her husband.

That she might lose it, that the gossamer cord that alone bound so frail a thing to life might be abruptly broken, never, strange to say, occurred to Margaret at all. The doctor had told her in the beginning that it was a

healthy child ; and as it slept a great deal, and rarely cried, they all naturally arrived at the conclusion that its premature birth had not increased its delicacy, and that it had exactly the same chances of living and growing strong and robust as other infants.

Elizabeth, who began to get about the house and garden leaning on her father's arm, or occasionally helped by the good old Babette—Babette who sang all day long since her young mistress was about again—Elizabeth was as much interested in this new member of the family as she could have been in anything, while her own trials weighed so heavily and unceasingly upon her spirits. She had been almost as excited and remorseful as her father during the few days that Margaret's life was in peril ; and now that the latter was rapidly recovering, her step-daughter's great desire was to do all she could for her, to sit with



her for hours either in-doors or under the famous magnolia tree, to bring her choice fruit and nosegays, when the invalid could not go into the garden herself, to nurse the baby, whenever Margaret could make up her mind to spare the frail atom from the maternal lap, and in short to repay, as far as she could, the devoted and disinterested attention she had received in her own extremity.

"Don't forbid my trying to forget the bitter sorrows of my lot," she would often say with a sudden rush of torturing remembrance, when Margaret protested against her exertions of any kind. "You *must* know that you and that pure baby angel of yours, are pleasanter things to think about than the man fiend I married, and who has left in my whole nature the venom of the poisoned weapons he employed to destroy me. When I look at that child, I can only wonder blindly that *it* and a being like

Herbert Meredith can belong to the same humanity. If I were a mother, the mother at least of a male child, I think I should pray night and day for it to die in infancy, lest it should grow up as men *can* grow, and be."

And Margaret, hugging her treasure to her heart, would reply—

"I am thankful my darling is a girl, Elizabeth; though I should not fear that even a boy who called my husband 'father,' would develop into anything but a good man."

David was very proud, very exultant, very full of content at this time. He had not yet begun to be jealous of Margaret's adoration of their wee daughter; for the novelty of seeing her in the character of a mother, and literally brimming over with happiness, more than atoned for any failure he had perceived in her attentions and watchful ministrings to his own comfort and plea-

tures. He was delighted also in observing the ever growing friendship and esteem between his wife and Elizabeth. Sometimes, when they were together, he could scarcely credit the evidence of his senses, but was tempted to think he must be dreaming all the affectionate words, and kindly looks, and mutual good offices, that were exchanged so freely between them. The one cloud upon the horizon was poor Elizabeth's continued and almost unvarying dejection, and the morbid shrinking she expressed, though acknowledging that she loathed the associations of the place they were now in, from the idea of returning to England. She had agreed however, to her father's very earnest wish, that she should accompany him and Margaret to the hall, and make it her home for the present. Babette was to go with them in the character of Elizabeth's own personal attendant; and the old woman was as delighted in the anticipation of visiting a

new country, and of living in the fine house of which the English maid had told her, as if she had been sixteen instead of nearly sixty, and life all before, instead of all behind her.

They had fixed to start from Luchon in quite the latter days of June, and when the tiny French flower they hoped to transplant to a new soil would have attained its fifth week of existence. David and Margaret had both a longing now to get home, the husband chiefly to resume the active and interesting duties that had, necessarily, been laid aside here, the wife, mainly, it must be owned, to exhibit her pearl of babies to her own mother.

Of course, a full and particular description of its unrivalled charms had been written, by turns, to Mrs. Bellew, to Amy, and to Rhoda; and Margaret never for an instant doubted that they were all three counting the hours that must still elapse before they

could contemplate, in the flesh, the rare bit of perfection in snowy lace and muslins whose picture she had so often and so obligingly drawn for them.

The two girls had certainly answered her enthusiastic letters with nearly equal enthusiasm, saying (Amy especially) that they *yearned* to see darling baby, and hoped that they might be allowed to help in choosing a lovely name for it. But Mrs. Bellew declined, as yet, to indulge in any heroics, and only advised Margaret to make her infant wear caps, and on no account to concoct any food for it with the sour French bread, let it be ever so hungry. In the same letter that contained this valuable advice, Mrs. Bellew mentioned that the young ladies under her charge appeared very happy, and that their evenings were often enlivened by the society of the Rector and his junior curate.

"You must call the child Daisy," said Elizabeth, one day, when she and Margaret

had been talking about its christening. "That is really, Margaret, you know, travestied, and I am sure papa will insist on its having your name. Besides, it will just suit the wee white thing. And I mean, if you will let me, to be one of its god-mammas."

"I shall be delighted," answered Margaret, with the joyous expression in her eyes that had never left them since the wee white thing came on the stage; "and I agree with you that Daisy will be a charming name for our darling. If it had been a boy I should of course have called him David."

They went out for a long drive that evening, the whole party, including baby and its young French nurse, together. They had only three more days to remain at Luchon, and Margaret had seen scarcely anything of the neighbourhood yet. She did not care about going herself, but David wished it, and so she yielded cheerfully. He

was very good and unselfish in letting her devote so much of her time to his rival, and the wife, who loved her husband all the more for not being jealous, was really glad when she could do anything, that did not involve a separation from her treasure, to please him.

They found the country excessively picturesque and attractive, and they stayed out late, not heeding the somewhat heavy fog that, after a day of scorching heat, had arisen from the steaming earth. It was not cold even now, and the whole air was laden with the perfume of the delicious flowers that grow wild, and in rich luxuriance, everywhere in those southern latitudes.

"Baby cannot possibly have been hurt, can she?" said Margaret to her husband, as a rather chill blast met them just when they were arriving at home. "See, she has been covered up for the last hour beyond the tip

of her precious little nose, and she is as sound asleep as though she were in her own warm crib up-stairs. She cannot possibly have been hurt, can she?"

"Hurt, no," replied David, cheerfully, as he hurried Margaret herself into the house. "You, my love, are far more likely to have taken cold. Baby is strong and well, and not made of wax either. Don't stay all the evening undressing the young lady. Put her to bed, and come down and have some tea with Elizabeth and myself."

Margaret obeyed this injunction, and was very happy and contented down-stairs till, about ten o'clock, when the nurse suddenly came with an anxious face into the room, and told her mistress that *la petite* had awakened very fretful, and appeared to be shivering all over.

In two minutes more, Margaret was in the bedroom, with her child wrapped in a warm blanket in her own lap, and her face,—

scarcely a very frightened face as yet,—bent lovingly and anxiously over it.


Presently David joined her, and they had a fire lighted, and a warm bath prepared, sending, in the meanwhile, to beg the doctor would step round, as Margaret was really wholly inexperienced in the management of babies, and the nurse seemed rather inclined to think the matter serious.

“It cannot be anything alarming,” the poor mother kept saying, as she rocked the moaning child to and fro, and appealed nearly every minute to the utterly ignorant father. “David, why don’t you speak?” she would add, pitifully. “You *know* it can be nothing particular. My darling was quite well before we went out, and not a breath of that foggy air could have reached her,”

And David, whose heart bled for his wife, tried to soothe her by repeating her words, and endorsing them with his own very worthless opinion.

Some minutes, nearly a quarter of an hour, passed in this way, and then, as the doctor tarried, Margaret began, with trembling fingers, to undress the baby for its bath. Its tiny frame still shook and shivered violently, and the mother, almost rigid with a vague terror now, was calling to somebody, anybody (for Elizabeth had stolen into the room to share that anxious watch and waiting), to heap more wood on the fire, to push the bath closer to it, to see that every door and window was tightly shut; when suddenly, in a moment, without warning, beyond the symptoms already manifested, the wee creature's feeble wail was exchanged for a strong convulsion of its whole body—another, and yet another, while Margaret's wild arms in vain sought to restrain those agonized writhings.

"The bath, madame, the bath," exclaimed the nurse; while David, at an imploring glance from his wife, rushed out of the room to go himself for the doctor.



Alas! neither bath nor doctor could avail now to keep, in a world too chill for it, that tiny flower of paradise. Elizabeth had called it once a "child angel," and a child angel of rare and touching loveliness it looked, when, after another and a milder fit, it stretched its pure limbs in death on Margaret's knees, and resigned its brief part in life's fitful fever for ever. Till David came, no one ventured to take the little corpse from its mother's lap—the crushed mother, who shed no tear, and only sat dumbly gazing at all that remained to her of her precious one, with a burning spot on either cheek, and a heaving of the heart that was visible to all who watched her.

She offered no resistance when her husband, at length, joined her, and gently lifted the dead child. But David positively shuddered at the hungry look that came into those tender eyes, at that moment, and for many a long and weary day was never absent from them.

CHAPTER XIV.

GOING HOME.

THEY buried their little snowdrop in foreign ground, and only delayed by half a week their return to England. Margaret would not suffer any change of plans to be made on her account. She knew, from the first, that the dread void in her heart would be an abiding feeling, not to be affected by time, or place, or circumstance of any description. She knew, too, that her sorrow must be suffered alone, as far as human participation in it was concerned, just and only because no one, except a mother who had gone through an exactly similar experience (and

poor Margaret could never have been brought to believe that heaven had sent more than one baby like hers into the world), could even dimly understand it.

David had been very fond of his wee daughter, very proud of its really remarkable and ethereal loveliness, very anxious that it should live and grow up to be a joy and a brightness in their quiet home ; but his affection for it bore no more analogy to the affection of the mother than the feeble warmth of a winter's sun bears to the heat of volcanic fires. And Margaret, recognizing this, knowing it to be in accordance with nature's unalterable laws, had no weak craving for the sympathy it was not in her husband's power to bestow.

He gave her pity of the tenderest kind ; he gave her, if possible, a fuller measure of love than he had ever given her before ; he gave her a watchful care that the most devoted mother could not have surpassed ; and

Margaret was abundantly satisfied and grateful. It was not his fault that he could not enter into the desolate chambers of her heart, and *comprehend* the grief for which she had no name, of which she made no parade, but whose existence she felt to be like the deadly upas tree, poisoning all the healthy springs of existence, blotting out the sweet sunshine, and casting black shadows over all the smiling earth around her.

In the presence of a sorrow like this (Rachel mourning for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they were not), a sorrow that never wept, that never complained, and only made itself known to the beholders by that hungry look in the eyes before spoken of, and a certain abstraction even in the midst of talking, working, or employment by any kind, that was pathetic beyond all words ; in the presence, I say, of a sorrow like this, even Elizabeth ceased for the time to dwell on her own wrongs and

misfortunes, surrounding Margaret with the most affectionate though unobtrusive attentions, often secretly weeping for her who seemed unable to weep for herself, and, in short, uniting with her father in doing all that human love, and tenderness, and pity *could* do, to mitigate a sadness that was only to be reached, and that not yet, by the divine touch.

Although Margaret had firmly opposed any suggestion of prolonging their stay in France, David discovered that she suffered, even to agony, in the thought of returning to England without her child; the wondrous babe, of whom she had sent home such glowing accounts, and whose first presentation to her own mother had been the subject of so many fond and foolish, though perfectly natural dreams.

It occurred to the husband, ever on the watch for his poor wife's relief in any way, that it might be a good idea to get Mrs.

Bellew to receive her daughter at the Hall, on their first arrival. She was a hard woman in some respects, but David was sure she loved her only child with a very warm affection; and being a mother herself she would probably enter more into the mystery of this bereaved mother's suffering, than those about her here had been able to do. Anyhow he wrote and made the suggestion, telling Mrs. Bellew the condition his wife was in, and expressing his belief, his hope at least, that her unlooked for presence might excite some outward demonstration which would soften the inward pain. "This dumb, voiceless misery," he added, "is killing my poor patient girl, and my heart bleeds to see it."

David had, no doubt, a hard time of it just now, with little opportunity to think of himself, or to nurse any morbid emotions whatever. There was his wife—whom he had always depended on hitherto to cheer

and amuse and comfort him—a living monument of silent woe; there was Elizabeth still very delicate in health, and though striving for Margaret's sake to thrust all her own troubles in the background, a wreck of her old self, a deserted wife, and, beyond all question, a very unhappy woman indeed. And then there were the numerous details of their long and fatiguing journey to arrange, all the business connected with the giving up of the little villa to be seen to, debts that Herbert had managed to contract, even in that neighbourhood, to be inquired into and paid; and in short half a hundred things to be done that David alone could do now; and which, but for the necessity of the case, he would have declared quite beyond his capability of performance.

To his credit, however, it must be recorded that he got through the whole of his work remarkably well, sparing Margaret and Elizabeth all the worry and exertion he

could take on his own shoulders, treating them with the tenderest consideration throughout the journey, spending his money lavishly for their comfort, and winning from them both—though they might be little expressive of it at the time—their very warmest gratitude and admiration.

It was on a sultry July evening that they at length reached the Hall. Margaret had been outwardly more composed than Elizabeth during all that last day. Her powers of self-control were naturally far larger than those of her step-daughter; and, besides this, she had probably a keener appreciation of David's present cross, and could realize what it must be to a man of his temperament to be bringing home a wife and daughter plunged in the deepest gloom.

But poor Elizabeth, whose memories were all necessarily of the most bitter, self accusing kind, had become distressingly excited from the moment their party landed in England,

and when the first view of the home she had left clandestinely burst upon her sight, her agitation grew alarming, and David had to rouse his wife from one of her long fits of abstraction, that she might join with him in endeavouring to calm the miserable girl.

A single pressure of Margaret's hand had an almost magical effect. Elizabeth looked up, through her blinding, passionate tears, into the white, worn face of her ever uncomplaining step-mother, and made a desperate effort to be calm again.

"I know, I know," she said excitedly, "that your heart is as heavy as mine; but your conscience is lighter, and that makes all the difference."

Then, when Margaret bent forward and kissed the flushed cheek tenderly, she added pitifully—

"I am so young yet in years; and it is my lost life I am thinking of."

Amy was at the bottom of the steps as their carriage drove up, and after a rapid general greeting she wound her arms round her sobbing sister, and hurried her out of sight of everybody, while David, leading his pale wife silently to her own room, just opened the door, and, pushing her gently in, left her to the comfort he had there so thoroughly secured for her.

Margaret's utter surprise on seeing Mrs. Bellew advancing to meet her, was the first emotion of an impulsive kind which she had been conscious of since her baby was taken from her. She uttered a little cry, and then, like a tired child, put her head upon her mother's shoulder, and in an impetuous torrent of tears—the stoical Mrs. Bellew had set her the example—bewailed her irreparable loss, and tried to speak of her darling's angelic attributes.

The situation was so new to Mrs. Bellew, who shrank from whatever was unfamiliar

and strange as most people shrink from bodily torture, that, in spite of her deep compassion, she longed to abbreviate the scene, and with this object she dashed her hand indignantly across her own eyes, shook herself, morally and physically, and, trying to speak with something of her old jerkiness, exclaimed, while stroking the poor white face she could not bear to look at,

“There, there, my dear, I am sure your infant was all you say; but it was not the first baby that ever came into the world, nor will it be the last. Cheer up, Margaret. Your life is of more importance, you know, than the lives of a hundred babies; and if you go on fretting like this, David Fletcher will soon have two wives instead of one in the Ditchley cemetery.”

If there was logic in this reasoning, poor Margaret quite failed to see it; and she looked so hurt at her mother's attempt at commonplaces in the way of sympathy,

that Mrs. Bellew thought it well to change her tactics.

"My dear girl," she hastened to say, in a feeling and serious tone—"don't imagine, for a moment, that I make light of your trouble. I think the more of it, Margaret, that God, in His great mercy, never put the crown of sorrows *you* are wearing upon *my* head. I am sure if He had, I should never have borne it as meekly and submissively as you are doing."

"Oh," cried Margaret, with sudden passion and fervour; "I am not meek or submissive, mother. I am only dumb, because of my impotence, under the Hand that has smitten me. If rebellion or fierceness, or the outpouring of my soul in tears, could bring back my little one, don't you think I should rebel and be fierce and weep a world of tears to make the grave give up its dead! Now, let us speak of it no more. Henceforth, my sorrow must be between God and myself.

I have come back to begin anew the duties of a life that has to be lived and filled, though the desire of my eyes has been taken from me with a stroke. Dear mother, it was so good of you to be here. You will stay this one night at least with me?"

Yes, Mrs. Bellew quite meant to stay with her daughter one night; that was in the programme. Rhoda had been left at Abbotsmead, to look after Priscilla, and the interests of the larder, till the mistress returned. It was altogether an unexampled thing for this mistress to sleep out of her own house, and she was beginning to be afraid that Margaret was too utterly absorbed in thoughts of her dead baby, to appreciate the sacrifice as it deserved to be appreciated. She made the most of it to David, later in the evening, using it as a set-off against her having declined to receive Rhoda's little maid, Polly, with the young ladies, when they were sent down to her in

May. She had been well pleased to take *them* in, she said, but a strange girl in her kitchen was a thing she never could have tolerated, even had Priscilla been likely to submit quietly to it, which her mistress was sure she never would have done. So Polly had been located all the time at the Hall, and had very much enjoyed her long holiday. Mrs. Bellew's apologies to David were quite unnecessary, if she had only known it; but they had been on her mind for two months, and she was glad of an opportunity of getting rid of them.

With a view of enlivening the whole party, after a rather melancholy and silent dinner, Mrs. Bellew suddenly announced, in a serio-comic tone, that she verily believed she had been made the innocent and unconscious means of furthering a very warm courtship, or, at any rate, a wooing, during the last two months. And when two or three heads were lifted quickly at her ob-

servation, she added, with a sagacious nod of her own—

“That young Palmer, who is really a nice fellow, with a fair share of brains, when you come to know him, has evidently taken a serious fancy to Rhoda Meredith; my belief is that the business was done last spring in the Dunross woods; but, anyhow, the man is over head and ears in love now. I am not aware how far the young lady guesses his condition, or how far she approves his attachment, if she *has* discovered it. They have neither of them made a confidante of me, and I only speak from my own observation. Amy, there, could no doubt tell you more, if she chose, but possibly she too may have her secrets, and will not venture to betray her cousin’s. I am sorry to part with them both. They made the old house very bright and cheerful.”

“I don’t think my little Amy can have many secrets,” said David, drawing his

blushing child to him, and kissing her tenderly. "She is such a young thing yet, and we shall all seem such old, sober folks, beside her."

"Yes," exclaimed poor Elizabeth bitterly, for she thought her father alluded specially to her prematurely aged appearance. "Amy might pass for my daughter easily now, only she has a sweet, calm face, and mine was always restless and brooding, like my mother's."

"It is not brooding often at present, Elizabeth," said Margaret, kindly; "and you and I, who have both a hard lesson to learn, must try to learn it quickly for dear Amy's sake. It is worse than robbery to condemn the young and happy to look for ever on a sorrow that they have no part in."

Amy was on the point of disclaiming this, when Elizabeth stopped her with an impulsive embrace.

"My dear child," she said, earnestly, "never let my troubles touch you, except in

the way of warning. They never shall if I can help it; only, I am still vilely ill-tempered and disagreeable at times, and that I am not so always, I owe entirely to our father's wife. Mrs. Bellew has looked at me so suspiciously the whole evening, that I have nerved myself to say thus much. She cannot have a deeper appreciation of the obligations I am under to her daughter than I have, nor half so deep; but we love each other, and therefore my generous creditor has cancelled the debt."

"With all her heart, if there was a debt," said Margaret, emphatically, while Mrs. Bellew looked from one to the other in pure amazement, and began to wonder whether, under some circumstances, step-mothers and step-daughters might not live in harmony, and be a blessing to each other.

CHAPTER XV.

FADING.

MRS. BELLEW returned home, and Rhoda came up to the Hall on the following day. Elizabeth shrank very much from her first meeting with Herbert's sister, and continued excited and restless for some time after it was over ; but to Margaret Rhoda's presence was especially soothing and agreeable, her mode of administering consolation being quite different from that of any of the others who had hitherto poured their wine and oil into the desolate mother's wounds.

"How honoured you will feel by-and-by, dear Aunt Margaret," she said, in her essen-

tially simple way, "when you think that God changed your child into an angel, to make your own path clearer to the land of light."

It was a happy thought, and it came almost as a new revelation to poor Margaret, who, though entertaining a general belief that all babies went to heaven when they died, had scarcely realized that her lost darling was alive now, and singing with the angels, beside the jasper sea. In her mournful visions she had always pictured her little snow-drop lying confined and cold in that far off cemetery, its mortal part being the part to which it was perhaps most natural for her anguished memory to cling. But Rhoda's simple announcement of what, to her pure mind, was a revealed fact, sank deep into Margaret's heart, and helped her, it may be, to bear her desolation with less inward repining, and to take up anew all the duties of her outward life with greater courage and self-abnegation.

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Very few, observing how the gentle mistress of the Hall resumed her old work in the household, how she attended to all the domestic affairs as in the beginning, how she still taught Amy, when the busy little parish worker found time to learn, how she walked and drove with her husband, how she tried to associate Elizabeth with herself in all she did, how she visited and received visits, as before—very few, I say, observing all this, could have guessed with what a really heavy heart and listless spirit the labours were accomplished. For Margaret never spoke of her dead baby, never indulged in the luxury of recalling, even to David, its rare attractions, never voluntarily gave any token to any living creature that the world was a different world to her from what it had been two months ago, that a gulf, wider than the ocean, and incapable of being filled up, divided her past from her present.

Why should she talk about it? Who

would understand? To every one who knew of her loss, it was just that a little puny infant had breathed for a few weeks the breath of life, and died! What then? Babies, as Mrs. Bellew had reminded her daughter, died every day, and mothers got over it; and the world went on as merrily and complacently as ever. It was such a little matter, after all, to make a fuss about.

So Margaret, who was wise in theory, made no outward fuss, discharged every duty of her life conscientiously; but through some perversity of her woman's nature, which would not allow of her discriminating between "little matters" and great, faded silently and secretly, day by day.

As yet, nobody had discovered that it was so; for, besides that she never said she felt weak and ill, or that her rest at nights was broken and disturbed, one or two events occurred about this time, of a sufficiently interesting nature to draw off

attention, of any special kind, from so very unobtrusive and self-suppressing an individual as Margaret.

Just before Rhoda was to leave the Hall, her mother imperatively demanding her presence at home again, the Reverend Lucius Palmer's card was brought in one day (while the ladies were sitting together after lunch), with that gentleman's compliments, and a request for a private interview, of a few minutes, with Miss Meredith.

"I will take him round the lawn," said Rhoda, without the sign of a blush, as she got up from her chair, and entertained that the others would not disturb themselves. "He will like to see the grounds, and he can say what he wants to say as well out of doors as in."

What the Reverend Lucius Palmer wanted to say, and did say, with a great deal of honest, manly feeling, was just this:—

He had been suddenly and unexpectedly offered a curacy in a densely populated London district, where the pay was tolerably good, but the work laborious and trying, the inhabitants being all very poor, very ignorant, and, for the most part, utterly irreligious and vicious.

"Some little time ago," the young man added frankly to his companion, who was pacing demurely beside him, and listening attentively to his story, "I should have declined this offer without a second thought, feeling my total unfitness for the responsible duties involved in it. I feel my unfitness still, but I am by no means sure that I should be justified in turning my back on work because I have not yet been a worker. The truth is, Miss Rhoda, I have never had a quiet conscience since the hour I found you in that quarry last year, reading to and teaching those rough men and women. I have always seemed to hear a loud voice

asking me what I am doing for the Master ; and now that this chance of real, self-denying work has come, I think I should like to take advantage of it—only—only,” concluded the speaker, getting rather husky and stammering at this point, “I am so dreadfully ignorant and inexperienced, Miss Rhoda, as regards the *kind* of labour I know it will be, that I shall not dare attempt it—however imperatively that voice may draw me on—unless you will have pity on me, and become my dear wife, and let us work together all our lives through.”

Here he naturally paused, and looked, or tried to look, with pleading, eager eyes into the bending face of the still calm and unexcited Rhoda. But her great flapping straw hat effectually concealed her features, and it was only by her quiet tones that her lover could judge how admirably she kept all her feelings under control, and in a state of the strictest discipline.

"I am glad you are thinking seriously of putting your shoulder to the wheel," she said. "You will be a great deal happier when you are working hard; and depend upon it, with a willing mind you won't be long in finding out the way to the hearts of your people. As regards your flattering suggestion about myself, you will not, of course, expect an answer to-day. I have never thought much about marrying, believing St. Paul's implication, that married women care more to please their husbands than to please the Lord, to be a true one. But it *may* be in this particular case, that you and I can please and serve the Master better together than apart. If on mature deliberation I feel that it is so, I will not resist my conviction. Anyhow, I will write you an answer from London in a few days. Now, come in-doors, and see Aunt Margaret and my cousins."

It is more than probable that the Reverend

Lucius had learned something of the character of the lady he wished to make his wife, during those two months of unspoken wooing to which Mrs. Bellew had referred. Anyhow, he never thought of asking for a prolonged stroll in the grounds, though he would have enjoyed it excessively; but suffered Rhoda to lead him quietly back to the house, where his buoyant spirits and happy face, as he talked for half an hour with the other ladies of the family, did not, certainly, suggest a very serious fear that the admirable Miss Rhoda's convictions would go against him.

Nor did they; for when she had been gone from the Hall about ten days, Mr. Palmer came up one morning, radiant and excited, to tell David and his wife that it was all settled, and his own beatification complete. Mrs. Meredith had been opposed to the match at first, thinking (which the young curate modestly said was quite natural)

that her daughter ought to look higher ; but she had given in now, and as their joint incomes would suffice to keep them comfortably, they thought of being married before the winter set in. Of course the curacy was accepted, but Mr. Palmer would try to arrange so as not to enter upon his new duties till after his marriage. He had never lived out of the country, and should feel lost in a great city like London all alone. He was to tell Margaret that she would have a long letter from Rhoda on the following day.

This promise was fulfilled, and they were all interested, and a little amused, by the very calm, matter-of-fact way, in which the young lady spoke of her engagement and future prospects. She liked Mr. Palmer very much, she said, and believed he would become, with encouragement, a diligent and faithful labourer in his Master's service. She should have been quite as well content not to marry at all ; but since marriage had

come in her way, she was convinced that this was the right thing for her, and did not doubt that she should be a happy wife. Mrs. Meredith had been immensely indignant till the felicitous idea occurred to her that Rhoda's settling elsewhere would enable her to give up her London home altogether, and go to Egypt to look after her poor dear Herbert, whom she persisted in regarding as the victim in the quarrel between Elizabeth and himself. Finally, Rhoda hoped her friends at the Hall would cultivate the society of her curate, while he remained at Ditchley, and look upon him, kindly, as a future near connection.

The next event that occurred was one of even deeper interest to David Fletcher's family, calling forth the sympathies of all, and the unmitigated astonishment of David himself.

Since his return from France, this gentleman had been working actively in many different ways in his own neighbourhood,

and his latest hobby, in conjunction with the Rector, and our old friend, Mr. Perkins, was the planning and building of a row of new almshouses on the outskirts of the town, and on the same road in which Abbotsmead was situated. Mr. Spenser had come up one day to the Hall on business connected with these houses (though for that matter he came on some pretence or other most days of the week), and after a longer interval than usual with David in the library, he went off, to the mystification of the ladies, without even asking to see any of them.

In a few minutes, the master of the house appeared at the drawing-room door, and beckoned to his wife to join him. They went out on the lawn, and when safe beyond the possibility of being overheard, David communicated to Margaret, who had guessed the secret by this time, the extraordinary fact that the Rector had been actually proposing for their little Amy, "that child," as

the father said, with some indignation, who might have been Mr. Spenser's own child, and who of course *could* only regard her middle aged pastor in the light of a father.

"Don't be too sure of that, my dear innocent David," answered Margaret, with a really amused smile. "You men are often as blind as bats in affairs of the heart. What will you say when I tell you that, at least six or seven months ago, I discovered that Amy was beginning to think of the Rector quite otherwise than as of a father? I have only, however, recently guessed that he would venture to think seriously of her as a wife."

"You astound me!" exclaimed poor David, almost gasping for breath. "Amy in love, and in love with Mr. Spenser! your old admirer—nay, your present one, too, my dear Margaret, if I am not greatly deceived. Why, I told the man the child would laugh at him, and he went away very dignified, and,

I believe, a little offended, though of course I said I would speak to Amy, and ascertain her feelings beyond a doubt. Where is she now, my dear? Let us call her."


They saw a gardener crossing the lawn at the moment, and sent a message to the house by him. In another minute or two, Amy, looking shy and flushed and somewhat expectant, was standing by her father's side, and listening, with downcast eyes, to what he had to say to her. When it was all said, and her reply waited for, she linked her arm in Margaret's, in a pretty little confiding way, as though sure of help and encouragement from that quarter; and spoke in a very low, bashful voice, addressing David—

"I shall never wish to marry anybody else, papa. I have liked Mr. Spenser always."

"Then you shall have him, my dear!" pronounced David, with instant acquiescence; "only I was never so taken by surprise in

my whole life. Now, run in at once, child (for you *are* a child, notwithstanding this quaint anticipation of your womanhood), and write and tell your lover to return to dinner. I shall have a great deal to talk about to his reverence."

No doubt the Rector of Ditchley was quite prepared for his speedy recall; indeed I think the chances are, that, much as he liked and was interested in the nice docile little girl who had been so long his pupil and lay curate, it would never have occurred to him to ask her to marry him, if he had not discovered that he had unconsciously won her heart. He was getting tired of a bachelor life; the Rectory, though a charming place in itself, would be all the better and brighter for a mistress; Amy had been thoroughly drilled now into the responsible duties of a country clergyman's wife; and really he had come to look upon the people at the Hall as almost the same as his own people. A closer



connection with them would seem the most natural thing in the world. He thought Margaret would be pleased too, and, somehow or other, he had acquired the habit of liking to do things that pleased her.

Anyhow, it seemed clear that the Reverend Mr. Spenser liked increasingly, when once it was all comfortably settled, the thought of having a bright little devoted, admiring wife of his own to take care of; for he developed into quite a model wooer, and appeared to grow younger and younger every day in the constant companionship of "the child" Amy, as her father still called her.

David had startled Mr. Spenser that first evening, almost as much as Mr. Spenser had startled him in the morning, by communicating the fact of Amy's heiress-ship, vice poor Elizabeth, who, through disobedience, had forfeited her inheritance. The Rector had immediately protested against taking a

penny of the money in question, and had wished that some arrangement should be made for its still being enjoyed by Mrs. Herbert Meredith. This, however, David told him, was beyond their power. All that he or Amy could do, when it actually came into their possession, would be to transfer a part of it to Elizabeth by a deed of gift; but he did not believe the poor girl would accept it even thus. She had her five hundred a year, and as she would probably always choose to live a quiet and secluded life, this was really a very ample income for her.

Mrs. Bellew was loud in her praises of her favourite, when she heard what he had so generously desired to give up. It almost needed some such exhibition of nobility on his part to atone for what she could not help considering the *little* weakness and foolishness of his choosing a wife young enough to be his daughter.

The marriage was not to take place till

after Christmas, as Mr. Spenser was going to beautify and entirely refurnish the Rectory for his youthful bride, whose wishes and taste he consulted on every point in connection with these improvements. Amy had to go down daily to see what was being done, and sometimes Margaret and Elizabeth would go with her. The latter obstinately refused to take up any work out of doors, even in the way of helping her often overworked sister.

“Do you think I want to show myself unnecessarily?” she would ask, with irritation, if ever Amy urged the matter. “I *hate* leaving the house, and never would leave it but to please Margaret. I will do anything for her, always, because she risked her life and lost her child through serving me. I can never repay her, but, on the other hand, every effort I make, henceforth, shall be made on her account alone; and if I do not die of despair and

utter weariness of living, it is simply because she tries to comfort me, and would grieve if she thought she was not in some measure succeeding."

It was a long summer again that year, and before its close David had to open his affrighted and half incredulous eyes to the unquestionable truth that his wife was gradually fading. He had noticed, on more than one occasion, that she looked thin and worn, and the Rector had noticed it too, and called the husband's attention to the fact. But David, unable to endure the idea of serious disease in connection with a wife so wholly beloved, had always sought to get rid of his impressions, and to persuade himself that it was only the warm weather which had tried her. The first time he became certain that there was something very wrong with his poor Margaret, was on the occasion of his finding her one day nearly crying her heart out over a little pencil sketch she had

quite accidentally discovered in an old drawing portfolio of Amy's. It represented only a very small infant, lying asleep on an elegant and fanciful crib, but underneath was written—

“Imaginary portrait of my little new sister at Luchon.”

There was not the least real likeness in Amy's sketch to the wee, frail baby who had died in its mother's arms; but all the same it had sufficed to unlock the sealed fountains of that mother's still living grief, and for awhile, her anguish had become past control.

David was very patient and very tender with his suffering wife, and in the end he managed to soothe and quiet her. But when she was wholly calm and still again, with all traces of those passionate tears wiped away, he saw that this was not the old Margaret, and recognized, with a thrill of deadly terror, that there was something

in her face, over and above its want of brightness and healthy colouring, which suggested rapid inward decay.

To satisfy him, she consented after awhile, and when the departure of the hot weather brought no improvement in her state, to be taken up to London for the best medical advice.

The physician they consulted greatly astonished them both by expressing his conviction that Mrs. Fletcher would, in the ensuing spring, become a mother, if her strength did not give way in the meantime. He admitted, frankly, that there seemed at present serious apprehension of this, as the pulse was unnaturally feeble, the heart weak, and the general vitality almost at the lowest ebb. He exchanged the handsome fee poor David, almost blind with emotion, slipped into his hand, for a lengthy prescription, recommended a generous diet, moderate carriage exercise, and, above all, a tranquil mind.

Here his ability to help the sufferer ceased ; and David, lifting his pale but perfectly calm wife into the vehicle waiting for them, exclaimed passionately, as he folded her to his heart—

“I cannot live without you, Margaret. You do not know to what an extent you *are* my life. Will you try, do you *mean* to try, my best and dearest, to live for me, or are you really longing to go to the baby you have lost, and who had not even learned to love you ?”

“I will try to live for you, David,” she answered, with something of the old tender smile that had first won him ; “but if I fail, you must let me die believing that you have still a happy life before you. I have succeeded in so very little that I set myself to do,” she added with a quiet sigh ; “but at least you must help me to believe, if I am taken from you, that I have succeeded in making you a little happier and brighter than I found you.”

“You have made earth a heaven to me, Margaret,” he said, in a choking voice; “but it would be something different from either if I were to lose you now! Don’t speak of it. I cannot bear it;—and surely God is pitiful!”

CHAPTER XVI.

LIFE OR DEATH.

THE winter that followed that prolonged summer was not a severe one, and for awhile Margaret appeared to be gaining strength and flesh, or, at the least, to have ceased to waste away as she had been doing rapidly during the whole autumn.

She was at her very best when Amy's marriage took place in February; and while they were all cheered and gladdened in observing the manifest improvement, David, ever ready to soar into the clouds on the very feeblest wings of hope that he could steal or borrow, was perfectly convinced that

the right turn had been taken now, and that his dear precious wife would be spared to comfort and to bless him. Margaret herself said nothing yet, but she spent a good deal of time with her mother, who was as resolute as the husband in declining to see danger, but who liked to have her poor child with her, and fancied that the quiet of Abbotsmead was especially good for her.

The month of March proved cold and stormy in an even unusual degree, and the invalid driving out one day in Elizabeth's pony carriage caught a slight chill, and had to lay up and to confess herself for the time fairly vanquished. They all nursed her with the tenderest assiduity, Mrs. Bellew coming to the Hall two or three times a week, and even the young, happy bride, leaving her Rector (unless he escorted her) to do her share in petting and fussing over this dearly loved object of general anxiety. But

Elizabeth, who from the first had claimed her right to be head nurse, suffered none of them to interfere with her special duties, keeping her own post in the sick room whenever else was there, indignantly refusing on any pretence to be relieved ; and, in short, brooding continually over her once hated step-mother as a hen broods over its favorite chicken.

Margaret was deeply and intensely gratified for all the affection she received, and in the midst of which she felt she could do no less than desire to live. But the weariness of life, that strange, sad weariness which had come upon her the very hour her little baby died, was not to be altogether subdued, just because she knew she would be sinful in indulging it. When David was with her, and forcing her to see that in dying she would take all his heart with her, the loving, tender wife was more than willing to stay for his sake ; but in her quiet lonely hours, in

the wakeful nights, the tired feeling would return, and then she could not help thinking of the resting places under the solemn cypresses, and yearning a little for *her* rest beneath their shade.

With April came warm suns and genial breezes, covering the reviving earth with a perfect carpet of flowers, filling the air with the sweet singing of birds, and making all things in the outer world beautiful exceedingly.

Margaret had been up and about again nearly a week, not well by any means, but still not bad enough to stay in bed; and keenly alive, both mentally and physically, to the improvement in the external atmosphere and the influences of the approaching spring generally. David thought her looks and spirits delightfully encouraging; he was sure she would continue now to gain strength, and he made her drive out with

him every day, and remain in the open air as long as she felt equal to it.

One very warm, lovely evening, as they were returning from the Dunross woods, Margaret, who had been quite silent for some time, abruptly laid her hand on her husband's arm, and said—

"It is quite early yet, David. Let us get out at the cemetery, and have one walk round it."

David shuddered, and turned pale for a moment.

"I don't see why we should," he answered presently, "it will only tire you, my love, and it is not such a cheerful place for an evening ramble."

"But it is a fancy of mine, dear," persisted Margaret coaxingly; and so he gave in, and let her have her own way in the matter.

"I want to get up to the cypresses," she said, when they had walked a little distance

along the level ground, "Not so far as your wife's grave, but just where the shade from the avenue begins. Will you take me there?" For she was so weak that she could not dispense with the help of her husband's arm, and David, though he abhorred the task just now, assisted her to mount the hill, and made her lean against him at the top, when breath and strength were failing her.

"You see," he said, reproachfully, "what a foolish, whimsical little woman you have been. The climb has been too much for you, my dear, and there was really no earthly object in it."

"Yes, there was," gasped Margaret, fighting with her rebellious breath. "Don't be angry with me, David, but I want to choose a spot to be buried in. I shall not, you know, die any the sooner for having fixed on my last resting place; and I see these cypresses so often, in imagination, that I could

not resist the yearning to come and look at them in reality. See, David, here is a delightful little nook, half in sunshine and half in shade. That is my grave, remember, and I should like a perfectly simple, unadorned tomb-stone."


"Come away!" cried David, in an almost stern voice, though there was no sternness, only immeasurable tenderness and love, in his quivering face as he spoke. "I was mad to bring you up here to-night, and you are both mad and cruel to talk as you have been doing. Oh, my Margaret" (with an abrupt dropping of the assumed harshness), "why must you torture me in this way? It is not death, I tell you, but renewed and happy life that is in store for you."

"We shall soon know now," said Margaret, softly, as they descended the hill. "I have written for Rhoda, David. Do you think she will come to me?"

* * * * *

It was near the end of April, and Rhoda (Mrs. Palmer now) had been over a fortnight at the Hall. She had obeyed Margaret's summons at once, leaving all her own duties, both at home and abroad, because she believed that her uncle's wife was dying, and knew that the latter loved to talk with her of eternal things. Hitherto, however, strange to say, Margaret, while evidently enjoying Rhoda's society, had lacked either the physical strength or the inclination to hold any specially private conversation with her, if, indeed, this had been her object in sending for her husband's niece.

But there came a day when she whom they were all watching with such fond and trembling anxiety, complaining of some unusual lassitude, went very early to her own room, telling Elizabeth and Rhoda they might come to her the last thing to say good-night. Elizabeth was the first to avail herself of this permission, and she extorted from



her step-mother a solemn promise to have her called, if she grew the least worse before morning.

"I am afraid you will," added the self-constituted nurse, "for you look half fainting now ; and I must desire Rhoda not to let you talk more than a minute."

But when Rhoda, having been emphatically warned by her cousin, was turning from the bed, after affectionately kissing its pale occupant, Margaret kept her hand tightly locked in her own, and said, entreatingly—

"Sit down, dear, beside me for a little while. I shall not sleep yet, and I want you to talk to me."

"Oh, but you are not strong enough even to be a listener to-night, Aunt Margaret," answered Rhoda, in obedience to Elizabeth's orders. "To-morrow we will have our chat."

"To-morrow!" repeated Margaret, in a low, thoughtful tone. "Who can be sure"

of any to-morrow, Rhoda? I want you to help me, if you can—you who have been toiling, like Milton's heroine, up 'the hill of heavenly truth' so many years—in solving the enigma of my life's failure. This failure presses upon my heart to-night. Do *no* earnest, honest efforts to do good succeed in this world, or is it that I have been a bungler in the special task I set myself?"

"If you mean the task of blessing my poor uncle's life, Aunt Margaret," said Rhoda, gravely, "you have assuredly not failed in it. You found him a desolate, unhappy man, dreaming away his energies, loathing existence, without his children's affection, and in great danger of growing into a confirmed misanthrope. He is now a happy husband, an esteemed father, and an active, useful member of society. What would you have? What more than this did you expect to accomplish?"

"It is not I who have accomplished even

this," responded Margaret sorrowfully. "I may, indeed, have added to his earthly happiness, but any woman who had loved him would have done as much; and if I am taken from him now, what will he have gained through me? Rhoda, I fear I set myself too proud a task; I reckoned too much on my human strength and skill. I should have pondered earlier the prophet's exhortation—'Seekest thou great things for thyself; seek them not.' In thinking over all my past life, and in looking closely at yours, it seems to me that a woman should be content to go softly, and, as you once said, just to ask daily guidance and help for the duties of the day, each day as it comes—and not to expect or wish to gain glory for herself. Dear Rhoda, I must needs have spoken out my thoughts to you some time, for I have learnt more from you than from any other living creature, and had I my life's work to begin over again, I should strive to do it meekly and humbly,

and to be content with the smallest and easiest tasks divine wisdom might appoint me. It *is* something to have made my dear husband happy, even for a brief season. Could I have my past over again, I think I would be satisfied in making him happy, and would ask God, day and night, to do all the rest."

Before the next morning dawned, the longed for and yet dreaded crisis had arrived. A boy was born to the weary and drooping Margaret, which, contrary to all the laws of nature, promised to develop into a fine, sturdy, remarkably healthy child, but the mother, whose strength and vitality this noble looking little fellow had apparently appropriated wholly to himself, was unconscious of the new, sweet gift she had received from Heaven, and not expected to survive the day.

"If my poor, precious love would only come to herself, and speak to me, speak at

least one parting word !” moaned poor David, as, after a six hours’ watch beside his wife’s bed, shared with the nurse and Mrs. Bellew, he was peremptorily ordered downstairs by that lady to take some nourishment.

“There, get along, David Fletcher,” exclaimed his mother-in-law, whose dry, lustreless eyes looked as if a good shower of tears would soften and refresh them. “You are doing no good here to yourself or anybody else ; and you are too glib with your parting words ; why should there be any parting words at all ? *I* don’t give her up yet, and wouldn’t, if all the doctors in the universe were against me.”

“You are an angel !” cried the impulsive David, seizing the speaker’s somewhat reluctant hands, and kissing them frantically, “but have you, my dearest woman, any grounds for this independent though heart-cheering opinion, or are you only giving it at random ?”

"I am not giving it at random," snapped Mrs. Bellew, who in times of great depression always appeared to find relief in snapping at somebody. "You may call my conviction instinct, faith, mother's wit, what you will. *I* call it simply commonsense, an endowment which I regret to find so many of my fellow-creatures deprived of. Your Ditchley apothecary believes that in the suspension of consciousness and of suffering which is being exhibited by his patient, nature is sinking fast. *I* believe it is restoring itself. We shall see who is right in the end. I do wish, however, we had not to wait so long for the other man's arrival. I have no more faith in what your Emerson says in his pompous voice, and with his fingers on that poor child's pulse, than I should have in the braying of a jackass. She ought to have gone to London before the birth of her child."

They had dispatched a special messenger to town (for these were not, unfortunately,

the days of electric telegraphs) to bring back the physician whom Margaret had twice consulted, but he could not reach Ditchley much before the early morning of the next day ; and until then they had only Dr. Emerson and their own incessant watchfulness to depend on.

Nobody, except the three already mentioned, was permitted to enter the room ; though Elizabeth felt her exclusion to be cruelly hard, and railed at her poor father, in something of her old style, on the occasion of his going down to get a mouthful of food that first evening.

“ For you know,” she said, with tears that had nearly as much of anger as of sorrow in them, “ that I would give my life, willingly, to save the life of your Margaret. I shall never get over it if she dies without my having seen and kissed her. I have a *right* to be in her sick room. She is more than anyone in the world to me.”

"Then you shall come, Elizabeth," said David, with a patient sigh, adding, rather to himself than to his daughter, "I may well cling to the dear wife who alone loves me beyond all others. One child has left me for a husband whose little finger is more precious to her than her father's whole body, and the other tells me, to my face, that she loves her step-mother best. I shall be a wretched pauper indeed if God takes my Margaret from me!"

Elizabeth, having gained her point, kissed her father with some show of affection, and reminded him that she owed Margaret a debt of gratitude which she had no means of paying except by the love and esteem she had, in her rebellious obstinacy, so long withheld.

The whole of that night the devoted watchers kept their post, Dr. Emerson having come up again, and remained in the house for several hours. But there was no

material change in the patient's condition as yet, and except that the pulse did not grow weaker (they had succeeded in forcing a little broth and plenty of stimulants down her throat at intervals), even Mrs. Bellew would have abandoned hope, and been unable to sustain, as she did now, the miserable husband's ever drooping courage.

But the morning came at last, and with it the great London physician to whom they all, in their helplessness, looked as to an oracle direct from the skies, and whose first words, after he had critically and leisurely examined the patient, startled and puzzled everybody who heard them.

"Is the child alive?" he asked, having failed to observe that the fine, lace-enshrouded crib, in a far corner of the sick room had a most substantial and rosy-cheeked occupant.

"Then bring it here at once," was his peremptory order, when an affirmative answer

had been given ; “ and never mind making it cry. I want it to cry, and as noisily as ever it can. Hallo, Mrs. Nurse, you have got a handful there, at any rate ! what a big chap it is ! and with lungs, I’ll be bound, to match its arms and legs. Now, young man, we’ll just see how pinching agrees with you.”

Apparently, though the doctor administered only a gentle dose, it did not agree at all, for the newly awakened child set up a cry that, while it effectually put an end to any doubt as to the strength of its lungs, sent quite a thrill of terror through the worn-out frames of its listening relatives, who were, however, exhorted to be patient, as the doctor intended his victim to scream on.

He did scream on, while various outward applications, of a potent nature, were tried, under medical direction, on the still unconscious mother. Finally, the baby was laid

upon the bed, and in a few minutes afterwards the first eagerly watched for change took place. Margaret's dull fixed eyes opened widely, a very faint and scarcely perceptible colour dawned on her grey face, the white dry lips parted in a smile of sudden hope and gladness ; and, as another infantile wail rose on the stillness of the room, she stretched out her feeble arms to receive her boy, her new baby treasure, into them.

It was held over her, in all after time, as a proof of the extraordinary development of the maternal instinct in her nature, that she had been brought back from the very gates of death, by the first unmusical notes of Master David's stentorian voice.

"You must take care of your wife," said the great London oracle, as, later in the day, and when he had fully satisfied himself that the patient was going on well, he was bidding good-bye to David ; "I have every hope that she will recover now ; but she is

not strong, and you must look vigilantly after her. It would have been a thousand pities for the mother of such a splendid boy to die."

And David, realizing, at length, that his beloved one was *not* to die, that his wild prayers had been heard, that God had shown Himself very pitiful and of tender mercy, went to his room alone, except for the presence of that joy with which the stranger intermeddled not.

Margaret's recovery was not a speedy one this time, for she had been brought very low, and death appeared strangely unwilling to resign his prey. But her baby-boy, and all the loving hearts around her, drew her gradually into an atmosphere of light and health and brightness again, causing her to rejoice and be glad that her life had been preserved, and making Heaven's sunshine warm and sweet to her, as it had been of old.

She did not forget the time of desolation and weariness she had gone through, nor the little snowdrop round whom every fibre of her heart had been twined, and whose grave was in another land ; but she recognized the wisdom and the grace which had transplanted her idol to a purer soil, and she learned to think of her always as a radiant angel, waiting in heaven for the mother who would have loved her too fondly and exclusively had she remained on earth.

Margaret loved her healthy, noisy, dashing boy with a very deep and tender affection too ; but he was less likely than her first child would have been to make her neglectful of her husband, or of any of the duties of her busy life. One reason for this being that he was really not in need of a mother's constant care, and another that Elizabeth took him under her especial guardianship from the beginning ; and was as fierce as a dragon when even his admiring

grandmamma put in her claim for a modest share of the young gentleman's delightful society.

Of course, his father adored him, and believed seriously that in this one infant were united all the perfections of every other baby born into the world since its creation. But his wife—his Margaret—given back to him from the dim, mysterious borderland, was still far more to him than ten children would have been; and as time went on these two appeared to grow ever nearer and dearer to each other.

By-and-by there came young voices at the Rectory, and Amy and her husband were always spoken of as an especially happy couple, which indeed they were; but the happiness of David and Margaret had something of a solemn undertone about it, which was touching and suggestive to all who witnessed their quiet, peaceful lives. Elizabeth heard nothing from or of her worth-

less husband, and it was believed she had no wish to do so. She continued to reside at the Hall, and to devote herself to the interests of Margaret and Margaret's child. She was never bright or particularly cheerful, but her temper softened under all the benignant influences around her; and even Mrs. Bellew at last ceased to remember that the quiet, amiable, self-forgetting woman with premature grey hairs amongst her raven locks, had once been "Miss Elizabeth, the vixen."

As for Margaret, she strives earnestly to act up to the convictions that came to her when she believed that there was no earthly future before her. She seeks no longer great things for herself, but leaning ever on Divine strength, asking daily for Divine guidance, she performs meekly and humbly the tasks of love and patience that are given her to do.

One day, sooner or later, she will go to

her rest in the spot she chose under the solemn cypresses that April evening ; but it will not be till her life's work is quite finished, and she is privileged to hear from the Master's lips those blessed words—

“ Well done, good and faithful servant ! ”

THE END.



